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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

December  
1993

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interview

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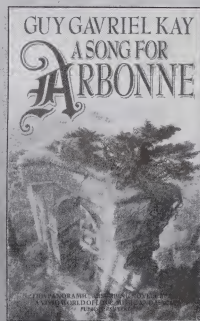
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# interzone

## SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

**No 78**

**December 1993**

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### Cover by SMS for Paul Di Filippo's "Walt and Emily"

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# Interaction

Dear Editors:

Commissions at the end of *Million* – I liked the idea very much. For years I'd failed to understand why there wasn't a single journal about the sort of books people actually read. Still, at least there is still *Interzone*, the finest fiction magazine I've ever read. May there be many, many more issues.

On issue 74: "The Ragthorn" was superb entertainment – even if the moral about tampering with things best left unknown was old hat, and the telling something of a succession of literary in-jokes. "My Informant Zardon" is simply stunning; *Last Year* of Morienbod filtered through 1960's Ballard and the richly gothic prose of Elizabeth Hand to produce something haunting, new and bewitching – more by Nasir soon.

As for the interviews with Jonathan Wylie and Simon Green, while I have to admire Simon Green's obvious sincerity at what he does, and most especially his determined 15-year struggle to be published, I don't feel these writers belong in *Interzone*. However skilfully crafted their books may be, and for all the talk of inverting genre conventions, Wylie and Green are purveyors of the endless formulaized sub-Tolkien nonsense – eloquently described by Storm Constantine as "pixie shit" – against the relentless commercial success of which genuinely creative and challenging sf and fantasy have been struggling to survive for the last decade. I've always seen *Interzone* as the only British bastion of the real stuff of sf and fantasy – carrying on where *New Worlds* left off, but without the excesses and with a more consistent standard of excellence – so it's ironic to see that both interviews in one issue are concerned with "the enemy." Whatever, keep up the good work. IZ is still a great magazine.

**Gary Dalkin**  
Bournemouth

Dear Editors:

I am halfway through my first subscription to *Interzone* and would like to make the following points on what I have read so far. Firstly, my congratulations on issue 74. I thoroughly enjoyed it, in particular the Simon Green and Jonathan Wylie interviews. Mr Green's perseverance and personality should be a sign to us all – what a genuine, down to earth person he comes across as! I'm so glad he eventually found the recognition he so obviously deserved. Bravo! And thanks for interviewing him and publishing it – it certainly provided me with the pick-me-up I required to reinstate my enthusiastic inspiration to knuckle

down and continue with my fourth, as yet unpublished, novel.

Thirdly, I thought the sf/fantasy preview section by Gollancz in issue 73 was a good idea. Why don't more publishers advertise forthcoming books like this? It beats the pants off relying on critics scanning them and passing judgment in the wink of an eye. Perhaps you are going to have some more previews like this, from more of the leading sf/fantasy publishers? I hope so for I think it is a good thing for all concerned – for publisher's profits, new author's confidence and the general punting public's enjoyment.

**Kelvin M. Knight**  
Southsea, Hants.

Dear Editors:

I was pleased to read Terry Lovesey's letter (IZ 76), in which he criticises ballistic details in my story with Garry Kilworth, "The Ragthorn," and in my novel *Mythago Wood*. I'm a great believer in attention to detail when describing historical events (though I do not claim a 100% accuracy record) since in "fantasy" of the type that I write, jarring detail-error can affect the feel of authenticity, and thus undermine the effort to re-create an effective vision of the past.

That said, in "The Ragthorn" we referred to a character having been shot (circa 1850) by an iron ball from "an old gun." Terry Lovesey says it would have been a lead ball, but blunderbusses, large and small, were often filled with anything and everything (scattershot), from stones, nails, bones, lead, iron – lead, yes, was used as ammunition in muskets, but we don't specify the type of weapon that was used to wound our hero, and in the story, Pottifer's assumption that the iron ball is a "bullet" is quite natural.

And when, in *Mythago Wood*, Stephen refers to "twenty pounds of Lee Enfield rifle" (as opposed to nine) he's not making a statement of fact (he has no idea how much a rifle weighs) but an expression of frustration through exaggeration (hyperbole) – as in "I know my wound is healing, but I'm still not strong enough to carry this lot and 20 pounds of friggling rifle!"

It's so often necessary to read a little between the lines. But Terry's letter is a salutary and welcome reminder that detail matters!

**Rob Holdstock**  
London

Dear Editors:

I don't usually write letters to magazines, but this time I had to make an exception, because I thought you would like to know about a little cult

that has been developing in our office. About a year ago, a man I work with brought a copy of your magazine into the office, anxious to show us all a story he thought was simply hilarious: "Agents of Darkness" by Molly Brown. Since then, whenever one of her stories has been in your magazine, he has brought it in so that we can all make copies. It seems that even her more "serious" stories always have a joke or two in them.

He brought in a copy of your magazine again yesterday, with "Ruella in Love." By lunchtime, everybody had their own photocopy, and several of us (me especially) found ourselves laughing on and off for most of the rest of the afternoon, especially over that brilliant closing line. Maybe you can pass the information on to Molly Brown, that she's got a little group of fans who think she's one of the most consistently witty writers around.

**Ellen Levy**

No address supplied

**Editor:** We're delighted that you enjoy Molly's stories, and have indeed posed on your good wishes to her. However, we do hope that other readers don't follow your example of photocopying her stories for distribution around a group (breach of Molly's copyright, and all that...) There's a new story by Molly Brown next issue; may it give you pleasure.

Dear Editors:

By the time I got to the end of the second paragraph of John Clute's notice of my variorum critical edition of H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (in the September '93 *Interzone*), it was clear to me that he was going to fault my choice of "copy-text." But it was only somewhere into the second page of his remarks that I realized that he was out to do a "hatchet job" on my book.

Mr Clute's main strategy for achieving that end is one of suppression. This, on the largest scale, dictated that he not divulge the contents of very nearly 200 of my volume's 287 pages. He thus does not say anything that would allow someone unfamiliar with my edition to guess that even the portion of my book that he focuses on takes extensive account of the extant manuscript materials as well as of half a dozen published texts of *Moreau*. Likewise, he does not so much as mention my transcription of Wells's first, and hitherto unpublished, draft, which takes up almost half as many (book) pages as the published text. And while I would not be so foolhardy

as to suppose that he ignores that and my book's other seven appendices because he could find no major mistakes in them, I am quite certain that his silence was integral to a calculated attempt to convince his readers not to look into an edition which he has "come heartily to dislike" (p.63).

This same kind of suppression is also operative more narrowly with regard to Mr Clute's account of my argument as to why the choice between the Heinemann (WH) and Stone and Kimball (S&K) first editions is something of a "...standoff" (xxxiv). Despite his devoting more than half of his review to the six pages of my 48-page general introduction which deal with that subject, Mr Clute manages to leave out some of my most important points while misrepresenting others. As it happens, however, he has made repetition of my actual case for S&K as unnecessary as it would be tedious; for his remarks, both in certain details and in their entire tenor, substantiate my final justification of my choice: "Given the inconclusiveness of all more or less objective criteria," S&K was chosen as the main text "because it is arguably a subtler rendering of Moreau than is WH, but chiefly on the grounds that it is the version least frequently reprinted and hence one that may defamiliarize the fiction so as to allow readers already acquainted with it to see it anew" (xxxv – the words I have italicized are among those that Mr Clute chose to omit; he quotes from this sentence only "the version... reprinted"). (I might add by the way that the principle for selection that Mr Clute enunciates – viz., that the "copy text should generally be that text which most fully represents its author's final thoughts about the first edition of the story in question" [p.62] – would exclude both WH and S&K in favour of the revision by Wells that served as the basis for the French translation of Moreau. I give full details about that rather drastic recension in Appendix 4.)

If the overall point Mr Clute seeks to make is not merely answerable but self-refuted in his very making of it, the same – alas! – cannot be said for some of the things that he calls attention to as mistakes. The errors about the frontispiece and endnote, in particular, are just that: errors. (My oversight with regard to the difference between WH's and S&K's endnote is all the more unfortunate because, in conjunction with S&K's subtitle ["A Possibility"], it offers itself as strong evidence that S&K incorporates Wells's last thoughts prior to Moreau's original publication – this on the grounds that S&K's subtitle gives prominence to the point which is missing from its version of the endnote and thereby prefigures the line Wells would take immediately after Moreau's publication

in various utterances reproduced and discussed in my appendix on "Wells in Defence of Moreau.") But contrary to what one might infer, those two errors, I have reason to believe, do not by any means typify the editorial work of the book as a whole, thanks chiefly to the fact that they alone did not come under David Y. Hughes's meticulous scrutiny when he voluntarily undertook to verify my collation.

Even so, it will be at least a minor miracle if there be no other noteworthy mistakes in my volume (apart, that is, from my misdating of the film version of *The Man Who Could Work Miracles* – the one incontestable error that Leon Stover found in its 287 pp.). For while I did have the cooperation of a host of people in addition to David Hughes (and including Eric Korn), the entire book, in virtually every aspect of its generation, was ultimately my doing except for the actual printing of the thing. Which meant – and it will be obvious to anyone who scans it that I speak without exaggeration – thousands of hours of often (literally) back-breaking concentrational labour over a five-year period. In the course of which it is easy to forget some things and overlook others, especially if one has two other full-time jobs to occupy one's mind. On the other hand, those very conditions which guaranteed that mistakes would be made were also inevitable if such a variorum edition were to be economically feasible – just as what Mr Clute deems the book's "ugliness" (64) was the inescapable dictate of its staying within the realm of affordability.

**Robert M. Philmus**  
Montreal, Canada

#### John Clute replies:

I'm afraid that my first response to this quite extraordinary letter from Professor Philmus was to look for a missing page. Readers of my comments in *Interzone* 75 on his variorum edition of Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* may recollect that the central point made in those comments was really a very simple one: Professor Philmus thought that the markedly less accomplished, American version of *Moreau* – the version he ended up choosing for copy text – had been printed in England, when it was in fact printed in the United States. If it had been printed in England, he might have had some reason for selecting it, as Wells could have supplied manuscript to the printers of both US and UK editions at more or less the same time; which means that Philmus might then have had some reason to argue that, because he'd shown there was no clear issue of priority between the two texts, he was therefore free to select as copy text a version of the novel that readers like myself had previously assumed was both earlier than and inferior to the UK version.

In truth, as we know, Professor Philmus made a terrible boner (one which vitiates his other arguments, which were in any case highly disputable, for using the US edition): He got the wrong continent. Because the version published in the US was also printed in the US, Wells would have almost certainly finished editing his US-bound manuscript at least one month earlier than Professor Philmus seems to have calculated, in order to get it across the Atlantic to its American printers in good time. The UK edition, therefore, was almost certainly edited later than the US. There are good reasons to assume so, and no compelling reason to assume otherwise. It is almost certainly not the case that the US version represents Wells's final pre-publication thoughts on the book; and there are several reasons to assume that the UK edition does. It was because he confessed to two major (but not cataclysmic) errors, but did not address this central error, which disqualifies so much of his years of labour, that I thought at first there must be a page missing from Professor Philmus's letter.

Very briefly then, to what he does say. (1) my review does indeed describe at some length the fullness of Professor Philmus's presentation of material, more in sorrow. (2) readers can decide for themselves whether or not my quoting more fully from his arguments for printing the US version would have strengthened his or my case. It might indeed seem palpably odd for a variorum edition to print a justly neglected version of a book – Wells himself never used the US text for any of the reprints or revisions he made over the remaining half century of his life – in order to "defamiliarize the fiction"; such an exercise might best be left to an appendix, where selected passages from the two versions could be contrasted; and the US copyeditor's intrusive punctuation conventions properly assessed, for instance. (3) I do not agree with Professor Philmus's inference that I am in fact arguing that the later French translation should be taken as copy text. It would be utterly foolish for anyone to suggest that a translation be used in this way. I am, however, perhaps misreading him. If he is in fact suggesting that the UK edition should after all have been used as copy text, in a form incorporating revisions Wells made to a copy of that UK edition for the French translator to work from, then he might well have a case: one sadly remote from his actual course of action. (4) it was not my intention to plague Professor Philmus with minor errors, and I made no attempt to scour the text or apparatus for fly-specks. Indeed, I returned quite happily to my

Continued on page 36



# CHAFF

**E**l Nido de Ladrones – the Nest of Thieves – occupies a roughly elliptical region, 50,000 square kilometres in the western Amazon Lowlands, straddling the border between Colombia and Peru. It's difficult to say exactly where the natural rain forest ends and the engineered species of El Nido take over, but the total biomass of the system must be close to a trillion tonnes. A trillion tonnes of structural material, osmotic pumps, solar energy collectors, cellular chemical factories, and biological computing and communications resources. All under the control of its designers.

The old maps and databases are obsolete; by manipulating the hydrology and soil chemistry, and influencing patterns of rainfall and erosion, the vegetation has reshaped the terrain completely: shifting the course of the Putumayo River, drowning old roads in swampland, raising secret causeways through the jungle. This biogenic geography remains in a state of flux, so that even the eye-witness accounts of the rare defectors from El Nido soon lose their currency. Satellite images are meaningless; at every frequency, the

forest canopy conceals, or deliberately falsifies, the spectral signature of whatever lies beneath.

Chemical toxins and defoliants are useless; the plants and their symbiotic bacteria can analyse most poisons, and reprogram their metabolisms to render them harmless – or transform them into food – faster than our agricultural warfare expert systems can invent new molecules. Biological weapons are seduced, subverted, domesticated; most of the genes from the last lethal plant virus we introduced were found three months later, incorporated into a benign vector for El Nido's elaborate communications network. The assassin had turned into a messenger boy. Any attempt to burn the vegetation is rapidly smothered by carbon dioxide – or more sophisticated fire retardants, if a self-oxidizing fuel is employed. Once we even pumped in a few tonnes of nutrient laced with powerful radioisotopes – locked up in compounds chemically indistinguishable from their natural counterparts. We tracked the results with gamma-ray imaging; El Nido separated out the isotope-laden molecules – probably on the basis of



# Greg Egan

their diffusion rates across organic membranes – sequestered and diluted them, and then pumped them right back out again.

So when I heard that a Peruvian-born biochemist named Guillermo Largo had departed from Bethesda, Maryland with some highly classified genetic tools – the fruits of his own research, but very much the property of his employers – and vanished into El Nido, I thought: At last, an excuse for the Big One. The Company had been advocating thermonuclear rehabilitation of El Nido for almost a decade. The Security Council would have rubber-stamped it. The governments with nominal authority over the region would have been delighted. Hundreds of El Nido's inhabitants were suspected of violating US law – and President Golino was aching for a chance to prove that she could play hard ball south of the border, whatever language she spoke in the privacy of her own home. She could have gone on prime time afterwards and told the nation that they should be proud of Operation Back to Nature, and that the 30,000 displaced farmers who'd taken refuge in El Nido from Colombia's undeclared

civil war – and who had now been liberated forever from the oppression of Marxist terrorists and drug barons – would have saluted her courage and resolve.

I never discovered why that wasn't to be. Technical problems in ensuring that no embarrassing side-effects would show up down-river in the sacred Amazon itself, wiping out some telegenic endangered species before the end of the present administration? Concern that some Middle Eastern warlord might somehow construe the act as licence to use his own feeble, long-hoarded fission weapons on a troublesome minority, destabilizing the region in an undesirable manner? Fear of Japanese trade sanctions, now that the rabidly anti-nuclear Eco-Marketters were back in power?

I wasn't shown the verdicts of the geopolitical computer models; I simply received my orders – coded into the flicker of my local K-Mart's fluorescent tubes, slipped in between the updates to the shelf price tags. Deciphered by an extra neural layer in my left retina, the words appeared blood red against the bland cheery colours of the supermarket aisle.

I was to enter El Nido and retrieve Guillermo Largo. Alive.

Dressed like a local real-estate agent – right down to the gold-plated bracelet-phone, and the worst of all possible \$300 haircuts – I visited Largo's abandoned home in Bethesda: a northern suburb of Washington, just over the border into Maryland. The apartment was modern and spacious, neatly furnished but not opulent – about what any good marketing software might have tried to sell him, on the basis of salary less alimony.

Largo had always been classified as brilliant but unsound – a potential security risk, but far too talented and productive to be wasted. He'd been under routine surveillance ever since the gloriously euphemistic Department of Energy had employed him, straight out of Harvard, back in 2005 – clearly, too routine by far... but then, I could understand how 30 years with an unblemished record must have given rise to a degree of complacency. Largo had never attempted to disguise his politics – apart from exercising the kind of discretion that was more a matter of etiquette than subterfuge; no Che Guevara T-shirts when visiting Los Alamos – but he'd never really acted on his beliefs, either.

A mural had been jet-sprayed onto his living room wall in shades of near infrared (visible to most hip 14-year-old Washingtonians, if not to their parents). It was a copy of the infamous Lee Hing-cheung's *A Tilting of the Plane with Heroes of the New World Order*, a digital image which had spread across computer networks at the turn of the century. Early 90s political leaders, naked and interlocked – Escher meets the Kama Sutra – deposited steaming turds into each other's open and otherwise empty braincases – an effect borrowed from the works of the German satirist George Grosz. The Iraqi dictator was shown admiring his reflection in a hand mirror – the image an exact reproduction of a contemporary magazine cover in which the moustache had been retouched to render it suitably Hitleresque. The US President carried – horizontally, but poised ready to be tilted – an egg-timer full of the gaunt hostages whose release he'd delayed to clinch his predecessor's election victory. Everyone was shoe-horned in, somewhere – right down to the Australian Prime Minister, portrayed as a pubic louse, struggling (and failing) to fit its tiny jaws around the mighty presidential cock. I could imagine a few of the neo-McCarthyist troglodytes in the Senate going apoplectic, if anything so tedious as an inquiry into Largo's defection ever took place – but what should we have done? Refused to hire him if he owned so much as a Guernica tea-towel?

Largo had blanked every computer in the apartment before leaving, including the entertainment system – but I already knew his taste in music, having listened to a few hours of audio surveillance samples full of bad Korean Ska. No laudable revolutionary ethno-solidarity, no haunting Andean pipe music; a shame – I would have much preferred that. His bookshelves held several battered college-level biochemistry texts, presumably retained for sentimental reasons, and a few dozen musty literary classics and volumes of poetry, in English, Spanish and German. Hesse, Rilke, Vallejo, Conrad, Nietzsche. Nothing

modern – and nothing printed after 2010. With a few words to the household manager, Largo had erased every digital work he'd ever owned, sweeping away the last quarter of a century of his personal archaeology.

I flipped through the surviving books, for what it was worth. There was a pencilled-in correction to the structure of guanine in one of the texts... and a section had been underlined in *Heart of Darkness*. The narrator, Marlow, was pondering the mysterious fact that the servants on the steamboat – members of a cannibal tribe, whose provisions of rotting hippo meat had been tossed overboard – hadn't yet rebelled and eaten him. After all:

*No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is; and as to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze.*

I couldn't argue with that – but I wondered why Largo had found the passage noteworthy. Perhaps it had struck a chord, back in the days when he'd been trying to rationalize taking his first research grants from the Pentagon? The ink was faded – and the volume itself had been printed in 2003. I would rather have had copies of his diary entries for the fortnight leading up to his disappearance – but his household computers hadn't been systematically tapped for almost 20 years.

I sat at the desk in his study, and stared at the blank screen of his work station. Largo had been born into a middle-class, nominally Catholic, very mildly leftist family in Lima, in 1980. His father, a journalist with *El Comercio*, had died from a cerebral blood clot in 2029. His 78-year-old mother still worked as an attorney for an international mining company – going through the motions of habeas corpus for the families of disappeared radicals in her spare time, a hobby her employers tolerated for the sake of cheap PR brownie points in the shareholder democracies. Guillermo had one elder brother, a retired surgeon, and one younger sister, a primary-school teacher, neither of them politically active.

Most of his education had taken place in Switzerland and the States; after his PhD, he'd held a succession of research posts in government institutes, the biotechnology industry, and academia – all with more or less the same real sponsors. Fifty-five, now, thrice divorced but still childless, he'd only ever returned to Lima for brief family visits.

After three decades working on the military applications of molecular genetics – unwittingly at first, but not for long – what could have triggered his sudden defection to El Nido? If he'd managed the cynical doublethink of reconciling defence research and pious liberal sentiments for so long, he must have got it down to a fine art. His latest psychological profile suggested as much: fierce pride in his scientific achievements balanced the self-loathing he felt when contemplating their ultimate purpose – with the conflict showing signs of decaying into comfortable indifference. A well-documented dynamic in the industry.

And he seemed to have acknowledged – deep in his heart, 30 years ago – that his "principles" were less than chaff in a breeze.

Perhaps he'd decided, belatedly, that if he was going to be a whore he might as well do it properly, and sell his skills to the highest bidder – even if that meant smuggling genetic weapons to a drugs cartel. I'd found his financial records, though: no tax fraud, no gambling debts, no evidence that he'd ever lived beyond his means. Betraying his employers, just as he'd betrayed his own youthful ideals to join them, might have seemed like an appropriately nihilistic gesture...but on a more pragmatic level, it was hard to imagine him finding the money, and the consequences, all that tempting. What could El Nido have offered him? A numbered satellite account, and a new identity in Paraguay? All the squalid pleasures of life on the fringes of the Third World plutocracy? He would have had everything to gain by living out his retirement in his adopted country, salvaging his conscience with one or two vitriolic essays on foreign policy in some unread left-wing netzine – and then finally convincing himself that any nation which granted him such unencumbered rights of free speech probably deserved everything he'd done to defend it.

Exactly what he had done to defend it, though – what tools he'd perfected, and stolen – I was not permitted to know.

As dusk fell, I locked the apartment and headed south down Wisconsin Avenue. Washington was coming alive, the streets already teeming with people looking for distraction from the heat. Nights in the cities were becoming hallucinatory. Teenagers sported bioluminescent symbionts, the veins in their temples, necks and pumped-up forearm muscles glowing electric blue, walking circulation diagrams who cultivated hypertension to improve the effect. Others used retinal symbionts to translate IR into visible light, their eyes flashing vampire red in the shadows.

And others, less visibly, had a skull full of White Knights.

Stem cells in the bone marrow infected with Mother – an engineered retrovirus – gave rise to something half-way between an embryonic neuron and a white blood cell. White Knights secreted the cytokines necessary to unlock the blood-brain barrier – and once through, cellular adhesion molecules guided them to their targets, where they could flood the site with a chosen neurotransmitter – or even form temporary quasi-synapses with genuine neurons. Users often had half a dozen or more sub-types in their bloodstream simultaneously, each one activated by a specific dietary additive: some cheap, harmless, and perfectly legitimate chemical not naturally present in the body. By ingesting the right mixture of innocuous artificial colourings, flavours and preservatives, they could modulate their neurochemistry in almost any fashion – until the White Knights died, as they were programmed to do, and a new dose of Mother was required.

Mother could be snorted, or taken intravenously...but the most efficient way to use it was to puncture a bone and inject it straight into the marrow – an excruciating, messy, dangerous business, even if the virus itself was uncontaminated and authentic. The good stuff came from El Nido. The bad stuff came from basement labs in California and Texas, where

gene hackers tried to force cell cultures infected with Mother to reproduce a virus expressly designed to resist their efforts – and churned out batches of mutant strains ideal for inducing leukaemia, astrocytomas, Parkinson's disease, and assorted novel psychoses.

Crossing the sweltering dark city, watching the heedlessly joyful crowds, I felt a penetrating, dream-like clarity come over me. Part of me was numb, leaden, blank – but part of me was electrified, all-seeing. I seemed to be able to stare into the hidden landscapes of the people around me, to see deeper than the luminous rivers of blood; to pierce them with my vision right to the bone.

Right to the marrow.

I drove to the edge of a park I'd visited once before, and waited. I was already dressed for the part. Young people strode by, grinning, some glancing at the silver 2025 Ford Narcissus and whistling appreciatively. A teenage boy danced on the grass, alone, tirelessly – blissed out on Coca-Cola, and not even getting paid to fake it.

Before too long, a girl approached the car, blue veins flashing on her bare arms. She leant down to the window and looked in, inquiringly.

"What you got?" She was 16 or 17, slender, dark-eyed, coffee-coloured, with a faint Latino accent. She could have been my sister.

"Southern Rainbow." All twelve major genotypes of Mother, straight from El Nido, cut with nothing but glucose. Southern Rainbow – and a little fast food – could take you anywhere.

The girl eyed me sceptically, and stretched out her right hand, palm down. She wore a ring with a large multifaceted jewel, with a pit in the centre. I took a sachet from the glove compartment, shook it, tore it open, and tipped a few specks of powder into the pit. Then I leant over and moistened the sample with saliva, holding her cool fingers to steady her hand. Twelve faces of the "stone" began to glow immediately, each one in a different colour. The immunoelectric sensors in the pit, tiny capacitors coated with antibodies, were designed to recognize several sites on the protein coats of the different strains of Mother – particularly the ones the bootleggers had the most trouble getting right.

With good enough technology, though, those proteins didn't have to bear the slightest relationship to the RNA inside.

The girl seemed to be impressed; her face lit up with anticipation. We negotiated a price. Too low by far; she should have been suspicious.

I looked her in the eye before handing over the sachet.

I said, "What do you need this shit for? The world is the world. You have to take it as it is. Accept it as it is: savage and terrible. Be strong. Never lie to yourself. That's the only way to survive."

She smirked at my apparent hypocrisy, but she was too pleased with her luck to turn nasty. "I hear what you're saying. It's a bad planet out there." She forced the money into my hand, adding, with wide-eyed mock-sincerity, "And this is the last time I do Mother, I promise."

I gave her the lethal virus, and watched her walk away across the grass and vanish into the shadows.

The Colombian air force pilot who flew me down from Bogotá didn't seem too thrilled to be risking his life for a DEA bureaucrat. It was 700 kilometres to the border, and five different guerrilla organizations held territory along the way: not a lot of towns, but several hundred possible sites for rocket launchers.

"My great-grandfather," he said sourly, "died in fucking Korea fighting for General Douglas fucking MacArthur." I wasn't sure if that was meant to be a declaration of pride, or an intimation of an outstanding debt. Both, probably.

The helicopter was eerily silent, fitted out with phased sound absorbers, which looked like giant loudspeakers but swallowed most of the noise of the blades. The carbon-fibre fuselage was coated with an expensive network of chameleon polymers – although it might have been just as effective to paint the whole thing sky blue. An endothermic chemical mixture accumulated waste heat from the motor, and then discharged it through a parabolic radiator as a tightly focused skywards burst, every hour or so. The guerrillas had no access to satellite images, and no radar they dared use; I decided that we had less chance of dying than the average Bogotá commuter. Back in the capital, buses had been exploding without warning, two or three times a week.

Colombia was tearing itself apart; *La Violencia* of the 1950s, all over again. Although all of the spectacular terrorist sabotage was being carried out by organized guerrilla groups, most of the deaths so far had been caused by factions within the two mainstream political parties butchering each other's supporters, avenging a litany of past atrocities which stretched back for generations. The group who'd actually started the current wave of bloodshed had negligible support; *Ejército de Simón Bolívar* were lunatic right-wing extremists who wanted to "re-unite" with Panama, Venezuela and Ecuador – after two centuries of separation – and drag in Peru and Bolivia, to realize Bolívar's dream of Gran Colombia. By assassinating President Marín, though, they'd triggered a cascade of events which had nothing to do with their ludicrous cause. Strikes and protests, street battles, curfews, martial law. The repatriation of foreign capital by nervous investors, followed by hyperinflation, and the collapse of the local financial system. Then a spiral of opportunistic violence. Everyone, from the paramilitary death squads to the Maoist splinter groups, seemed to believe that their hour had finally come.

I hadn't seen <sup>ε</sup> so much as a bullet fired – but from the moment I'd entered the country, there'd been acid churning in my guts, and a heady, ceaseless adrenaline rush coarsing through my veins. I felt wired, feverish...alive. Hypersensitive as a pregnant woman: I could smell blood, everywhere. When the hidden struggle for power which rules all human affairs finally breaks through to the surface, finally ruptures the skin, it's like witnessing some giant primordial creature rise up out of the ocean. Mesmerizing, and appalling. Nauseating – and exhilarating.

Coming face to face with the truth is always exhilarating.

From the air, there was no obvious sign that we'd arrived; for the last 200 kilometres, we'd been passing over rain forest – cleared in patches for plantations and mines, ranches and timber mills, shot through with rivers like metallic threads – but most of it resembling nothing so much as an endless expanse of broccoli. El Nido permitted natural vegetation to flourish all around it – and then imitated it...which made sampling at the edges an inefficient way to gather the true genetic stock for analysis. Deep penetration was difficult, though, even with purpose-built robots – dozens of which had been lost – so edge samples had to suffice, at least until a few more members of Congress could be photographed committing statutory rape and persuaded to vote for better funding. Most of the engineered plant tissues self-destructed in the absence of regular chemical and viral messages drifting out from the core, reassuring them that they were still in situ – so the main DEA research facility was on the outskirts of El Nido itself, a collection of pressurized buildings and experimental plots in a clearing blasted out of the jungle on the Colombian side of the border. The electrified fences weren't topped with razor wire; they turned 90 degrees into an electrified roof, completing a chain-link cage. The heliport was in the centre of the compound, where a cage within the cage could, temporarily, open itself to the sky.

Madelaine Smith, the research director, showed me around. In the open, we both wore hermetic biohazard suits – although if the modifications I'd received in Washington were working as promised, mine was redundant. El Nido's short-lived defensive viruses occasionally percolated out this far; they were never fatal, but they could be severely disabling to anyone who hadn't been inoculated. The forest's designers had walked a fine line between biological "self-defence" and unambiguously military applications. Guerrillas had always hidden in the engineered jungle – and raised funds by collaborating in the export of Mother – but El Nido's technology had never been explicitly directed towards the creation of lethal pathogens.

So far.

"Here, we're raising seedlings of what we hope will be a stable El Nido phenotype, something we call beta seventeen." They were unremarkable bushes with deep green foliage and dark red berries; Smith pointed to an array of camera-like instruments beside them. "Real-time infrared microspectroscopy. It can resolve a medium-sized RNA transcript, if there's a sharp surge in production in a sufficient number of cells, simultaneously. We match up the data from these with our gas chromatography records, which show the range of molecules drifting out from the core. If we can catch these plants in the act of sensing a cue from El Nido – and if their response involves switching on a gene and synthesizing a protein – we may be able to elucidate the mechanism, and eventually short-circuit it."

"You can't just...sequence all the DNA, and work it out from first principles?" I was meant to be passing as a newly-appointed administrator, dropping in at short notice to check for gold-plated paper clips – but it was hard to decide exactly how naive to sound.

Smith smiled politely. "El Nido DNA is guarded by

enzymes which tear it apart at the slightest hint of cellular disruption. Right now, we'd have about as much of a chance of sequencing it as I'd have of...reading your mind by autopsy. And we still don't know how those enzymes work; we have a lot of catching up to do. When the drug cartels started investing in biotechnology, 40 years ago, copy protection was their first priority. And they lured the best people away from legitimate labs around the world – not just by paying more, but by offering more creative freedom, and more challenging goals. El Nido probably contains as many patentable inventions as the entire agrotechnology industry produced in the same period. And all of them a lot more exciting."

Was that what had brought Largo here? More challenging goals? But El Nido was complete, the challenge was over; any further work was mere refinement. And at 55, surely he knew that his most creative years were long gone.

I said, "I imagine the cartels got more than they bargained for; the technology transformed their business beyond recognition. All the old addictive substances became too easy to synthesize biologically – too cheap, too pure, and too readily available to be profitable. And addiction itself became bad business. The only thing that really sells now is novelty."

Smith motioned with bulky arms towards the towering forest outside the cage – turning to face south-east, although it all looked the same. "El Nido was more than they bargained for. All they really wanted was coca plants that did better at lower altitudes, and some gene-tailored vegetation to make it easier to camouflage their labs and plantations. They ended up with a small *de facto* nation full of gene hackers, anarchists, and refugees. The cartels are only in control of certain regions; half the original geneticists have split off and founded their own little jungle utopias. There are at least a dozen people who know how to program the plants – how to switch on new patterns of gene expression, how to tap into the communications networks – and with that, you can stake out your own territory."

"Like having some secret, shamanistic power to command the spirits of the forest?"

"Exactly. Except for the fact that it actually works."

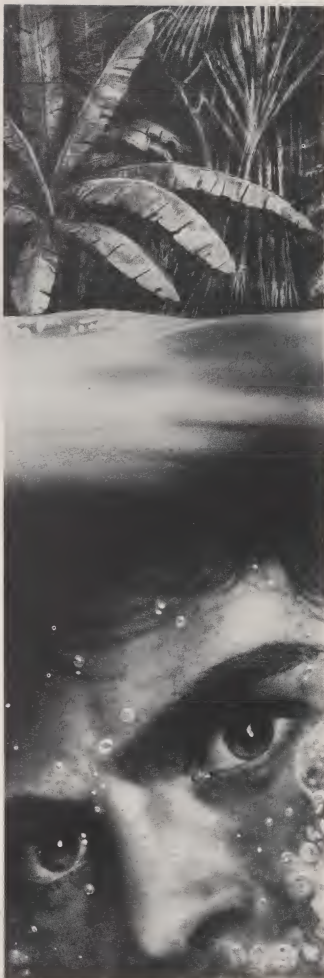
I laughed. "Do you know what cheers me up the most? Whatever else happens...the real Amazon, the real jungle, will swallow them all in the end. It's lasted – what? Two million years? Their own little utopias! In 50 years' time, or a hundred, it will be as if El Nido had never existed."

*Less than chaff in a breeze.*

Smith didn't reply. In the silence, I could hear the monotonous click of beetles, from all directions. Bogota, high on a plateau, had been almost chilly. Here, it was as sweltering as Washington itself.

I glanced at Smith; she said, "You're right, of course." But she didn't sound convinced at all.

In the morning, over breakfast, I reassured Smith that I'd found everything to be in order. She smiled warily. I think she suspected that I wasn't what I claimed to be, but that didn't really matter. I'd listened carefully to the gossip of the scientists, technicians and soldiers; the name Guillermo Largo hadn't been mentioned once. If they didn't even know



about Largo, they could hardly have guessed my real purpose.

It was just after nine when I departed. On the ground, sheets of light, delicate as auroral displays, sliced through the trees around the compound. When we emerged above the canopy, it was like stepping from a mist-shrouded dawn into the brilliance of noon.

The pilot, begrudgingly, took a detour over the centre of El Nido. "We're in Peruvian air space, now," he boasted. "You want to spark a diplomatic incident?" He seemed to find the possibility attractive.

"No. But fly lower."

"There's nothing to see. You can't even see the river."

"Lower." The broccoli grew larger, then suddenly snapped into focus; all that undifferentiated green turned into individual branches, solid and specific. It was curiously shocking, like looking at some dull familiar object through a microscope, and seeing its strange particularity revealed.

I reached over and broke the pilot's neck. He hissed through his teeth, surprised. A shudder passed through me, a mixture of fear and a twinge of remorse. The autopilot kicked in and kept us hovering; it took me two minutes to unstrap the man's body, drag him into the cargo hold, and take his seat.

I unscrewed the instrument panel and patched in a new chip. The digital log being beamed via satellite to an air force base to the north would show that we'd descended rapidly, out of control.

The truth wasn't much different. At a hundred metres, I hit a branch and snapped a blade on the front rotor; the computers compensated valiantly, modelling and remodelling the situation, trimming the active surfaces of the surviving blades – and no doubt doing fine for each five-second interval between bone-shaking impacts and further damage. The sound absorbers went berserk, slipping in and out of phase with the motors, blasting the jungle with pulses of intensified noise.

Fifty metres up, I went into a slow spin, weirdly smooth, showing me the thickening canopy as if in a leisurely cinematic pan. At 20 metres, free fall. Air bags inflated around me, blocking off the view. I closed my eyes, redundantly, and gritted my teeth. Fragments of prayers spun in my head – the detritus of childhood, afterimages burned into my brain, meaningless but unerased. I thought: *If I die, the jungle will claim me. I am flesh, I am chaff.* Nothing will remain to be judged. By the time I recalled that this wasn't true jungle at all, I was no longer falling.

The airbags promptly deflated. I opened my eyes. There was water all around, flooded forest. A panel of the roof between the rotors blew off gently with a hiss like the dying pilot's last breath, and then drifted down like a slowly crashing kite, turning muddy silver, green and brown as it snatched at the colours around it.

The life raft had oars, provisions, flares – and a radio beacon. I cut the beacon loose and left it in the wreckage. I moved the pilot back into his seat, just as the water started flooding in to bury him.

Then I set off down the river.

**E**l Nido had divided a once-navigable stretch of the Rio Putumayo into a bewildering maze. Sluggish channels of brown water snaked between freshly raised islands of soil, covered in palms and rubber plants, and the inundated banks where the oldest trees – chocolate-coloured hardwood species (predating the geneticists, but not necessarily unmodified) – soared above the undergrowth and out of sight.

The lymph nodes in my neck and groin pulsed with heat, savage but reassuring; my modified immune system was dealing with El Nido's viral onslaught by generating thousands of new killer T-cell clones en masse, rather than waiting for a cautious antigen-mediated response. A few weeks in this state, and the chances were that a self-directed clone would slip through the elimination process and burn me up with a novel autoimmune disease – but I didn't plan on staying that long.

Fish disturbed the murky water, rising up to snatch surface-dwelling insects or floating seed pods. In the distance, the thick coils of an anaconda slid from an overhanging branch and slipped languidly into the water. Between the rubber plants, hummingbirds hovered in the maws of violet orchids. So far as I knew, none of these creatures had been tampered with; they had gone on inhabiting the prosthetic forest as if nothing had changed.

I took a stick of chewing gum from my pocket, rich in cyclamates, and slowly roused one of my own sets of White Knights. The stink of heat and decaying vegetation seemed to fade, as certain olfactory pathways in my brain were numbed, and others sensitized – a kind of inner filter coming into play, enabling any signal from the newly acquired receptors in my nasal membranes to rise above all the other, distracting odours of the jungle.

Suddenly, I could smell the dead pilot on my hands and clothes, the lingering taint of his sweat and faeces – and the pheromones of spider monkeys in the branches around me, pungent and distinctive as urine. As a rehearsal, I followed the trail for 15 minutes, paddling the raft in the direction of the freshest scent, until I was finally rewarded with chirps of alarm and a glimpse of two skinny grey-brown shapes vanishing into the foliage ahead.

My own scent was camouflaged; symbionts in my sweat glands were digesting all the characteristic molecules. There were long-term side-effects from the bacteria, though, and the most recent intelligence suggested that El Nido's inhabitants didn't bother with them. There was a chance, of course, that Largo had been paranoid enough to bring his own.

I stared after the retreating monkeys, and wondered when I'd catch my first whiff of another living human. Even an illiterate peasant who'd fled the violence to the north would have valuable knowledge of the state of play between the factions in here, and some kind of crude mental map of the landscape.

The raft began to whistle gently, air escaping from one sealed compartment. I rolled into the water and submerged completely. A metre down, I couldn't see my own hands. I waited and listened, but all I could hear was the soft plop of fish breaking the surface. No rock could have holed the plastic of the raft; it had to have been a bullet.

I floated in the cool milky silence. The water would conceal my body heat, and I'd have no need to exhale for ten minutes. The question was whether to risk raising a wake by swimming away from the raft, or to wait it out.

Something brushed my cheek, sharp and thin. I ignored it. It happened again. It didn't feel like a fish, or anything living. A third time, and I seized the object as it fluttered past. It was a piece of plastic a few centimetres wide. I felt around the rim; the edge was sharp in places, soft and yielding in others. Then the fragment broke in two in my hand.

I swam a few metres away, then surfaced cautiously. The life raft was decaying, the plastic peeling away into the water like skin in acid. The polymer was meant to be cross-linked beyond any chance of biodegradation – but obviously some strain of *El Nido* bacteria had found a way.

I floated on my back, breathing deeply to purge myself of carbon dioxide, contemplating the prospect of completing the mission on foot. The canopy above seemed to waver, as if in a heat haze, which made no sense. My limbs grew curiously warm and heavy. It occurred to me to wonder exactly what I might be smelling, if I hadn't shut down 90 per cent of my olfactory range. I thought: *If I'd bred bacteria able to digest a substance foreign to El Nido, what else would I want them to do when they chanced upon such a meal? Incapacitate whoever had brought it in? Broadcast news of the event with a biochemical signal?*

I could smell the sharp odours of half a dozen sweat-drenched people when they arrived, but all I could do was lie in the water and let them fish me out.

After we left the river, I was carried on a stretcher, blindfolded and bound. No one talked within earshot. I might have judged the pace we set by the rhythm of my bearers' footsteps, or guessed the direction in which we travelled by hints of sunlight on the side of my face...but in the waking dream induced by the bacterial toxins, the harder I struggled to interpret those cues, the more lost and confused I became.

At one point, when the party rested, someone squatted beside me – and waved a scanning device over my body? That guess was confirmed by the pinpricks of heat where the polymer transponders had been implanted. Passive devices – but their resonant echo in a satellite microwave burst would have been distinctive. The scanner found, and fried, them all.

Late in the afternoon, they removed the blindfold. Certain that I was totally disoriented? Certain that I'd never escape? Or maybe just to rub my face in *El Nido*'s triumphant architecture.

The approach was a hidden path through swamp-land; I kept looking down to see my captors' boots not quite vanishing into the mud, while a dry, apparently secure stretch of high ground nearby was avoided.

Closer in, the dense thorned bushes blocking the way seemed to yield for us; the chewing gum had worn off enough for me to tell that we moved in a cloud of a sweet, ester-like compound. I couldn't see whether it was being sprayed into the air from a cylinder – or emitted bodily by a member of the party with symbionts in his skin, or lungs, or intestine.

The village emerged almost imperceptibly out of

the impostor jungle. The ground – I could feel it – became, step by step, unnaturally firm and level. The arrangement of trees grew subtly ordered – defining no linear avenues, but increasingly wrong nonetheless. Then I started glimpsing "fortuitous" clearings to the left and right, containing "natural" wooden buildings, or shiny biopolymer sheds.

I was lowered to the ground outside one of the sheds. A man I hadn't seen before leaned over me, wiry and unshaven, holding up a gleaming hunting knife. He looked to me like the archetype of human as animal, human as predator, human as unselfconscious killer.

He said, "Friend, this is where we drain out all of your blood." He grinned and squatted down. I almost passed out from the stench of my own fear, as the glut overwhelmed the symbionts. He cut my hands free, adding, "And then put it all back in again." He slid one arm under me, around my ribs, raised me up from the stretcher, and carried me into the building.

Guillermo Largo said, "Forgive me if I don't shake your hand. I think we've almost cleaned you out, but I don't want to risk physical contact in case there's enough of a residue of the virus to make your own hyped-up immune system turn on you."

He was an unprepossessing, sad-eyed man; thin, short, slightly balding. I stepped up to the wooden bars between us and stretched my hand out towards him. "Make contact any time you like. I never carried a virus. Do you think I believe your propaganda?"

He shrugged, unconcerned. "It would have killed you, not me – although I'm sure it was meant for both of us. It may have been keyed to my genotype, but you carried far too much of it not to have been caught up in the response to my presence. That's history, though, not worth arguing about."

I didn't actually believe that he was lying; a virus to dispose of both of us made perfect sense. I even felt a begrudging respect for the Company, for the way I'd been used – there was a savage, unsentimental honesty to it – but it didn't seem politic to reveal that to Largo.

I said, "If you believe that I pose no risk to you now, though, why don't you come back with me? You're still considered valuable. One moment of weakness, one bad decision, doesn't have to mean the end of your career. Your employers are very pragmatic people; they won't want to punish you. They'll just need to watch you a little more closely in future. Their problem, not yours; you won't even notice the difference."

Largo didn't seem to be listening, but then he looked straight at me and smiled. "Do you know what Victor Hugo said about Colombia's first constitution? He said it was written for a country of angels. It only lasted 23 years – and on the next attempt, the politicians lowered their sights. Considerably." He turned away, and started pacing back and forth in front of the bars. Two Mestizo peasants with automatic weapons stood by the door, looking on impassively. Both incessantly chewed what looked to me like ordinary coca leaves; there was something almost reassuring about their loyalty to tradition.

My cell was clean and well furnished, right down to

the kind of bioreactor toilet that was all the rage in Beverly Hills. My captors had treated me impeccably, so far, but I had a feeling that Largo was planning something unpleasant. Handing me over to the Mother barons? I still didn't know what deal he'd done, what he'd sold them in exchange for a piece of El Nido and a few dozen bodyguards. Let alone why he thought this was better than an apartment in Bethesda and a hundred grand a year.

I said, "What do you think you're going to do, if you stay here? Build your own country for angels? Grow your own bioengineered utopia?"

"Utopia?" Largo stopped pacing, and flashed his crooked smile again. "No. How can there ever be a utopia? There is no right way to live, which we've simply failed to stumble upon. There is no set of rules, there is no system, there is no formula. Why should there be? Short of the existence of a creator – and a perverse one, at that – why should there be some blueprint for perfection, just waiting to be discovered?"

I said, "You're right. In the end, all we can do is be true to our nature. See through the veneer of civilization and hypocritical morality, and accept the real forces which shape us."

Largo burst out laughing. I actually felt my face burn at his response – if only because I'd misread him, and failed to get him on side; not because he was laughing at the one thing I believed in.

He said, "Do you know what I was working on, back in the States?"

"No. Does it matter?" The less I knew, the better my chances of living.

Largo told me anyway. "I was looking for a way to render mature neurons embryonic. To switch them back into a less differentiated state, enabling them to behave the way they do in the foetal brain: migrating from site to site, forming new connections. Supposedly as a treatment for dementia and stroke... although the work was being funded by people who saw it as the first step towards viral weapons able to rewire parts of the brain. I doubt that the results could ever have been very sophisticated – no viruses for imposing political ideologies – but all kinds of disabling or docile behaviour might have been coded into a relatively small package."

"And you sold that to the cartels? So they can hold whole cities to ransom with it, next time one of their leaders is arrested? To save them the trouble of assassinating judges and politicians?"

Largo said mildly, "I sold it to the cartels, but not as a weapon. No infectious military version exists. Even the prototypes – which merely regress selected neurons, but make no programmed changes – are far too cumbersome and fragile to survive at large. And there are other technical problems. There's not much reproductive advantage for a virus in carrying out elaborate, highly specific modifications to its host's brain; unleashed on a real human population, mutants which simply ditched all of that irrelevant shit would soon predominate."

"Then..."

"I sold it to the cartels as a product. Or rather, I combined it with their own biggest seller, and handed over the finished hybrid. A new kind of Mother."

"Which does what?" He had me hooked, even if I was digging my own grave.

"Which turns a subset of the neurons in the brain into something like White Knights. Just as mobile, just as flexible. Far better at establishing tight new synapses, though, rather than just flooding the inter-neural space with a chosen substance. And not controlled by dietary additives; controlled by molecules they secrete themselves. Controlled by each other."

That made no sense to me. "Existing neurons become mobile? Existing brain structures... melt? You've made a version of Mother which turns people's brains to mush – and you expect them to pay for that?"

"Not mush. Everything's part of a tight feedback loop: the firing of these altered neurons influences the range of molecules they secrete – which in turn, controls the rewiring of nearby synapses. Vital regulatory centres and motor neurons are left untouched, of course. And it takes a strong signal to shift the Grey Knights; they don't respond to every random whim. You need at least an hour or two without distractions before you can have a significant effect on any brain structure."

"It's not altogether different from the way ordinary neurons end up encoding learned behaviour and memories – only faster, more flexible... and much more widespread. There are parts of the brain which haven't changed in 100,000 years, which can be remodelled completely in half a day."

He paused, and regarded me amiably. The sweat on the back of my neck went cold.

"You've used the virus –?"

"Of course. That's why I created it. For myself. That's why I came here in the first place."

"For do-it-yourself neurosurgery? Why not just slip a screwdriver under one eyeball and poke it around until the urge went away?" I felt physically sick. "At least... cocaine and heroin – and even White Knights – exploited natural receptors, natural pathways. You've taken a structure which evolution has honed over millions of years, and –"

Largo was greatly amused, but this time he refrained from laughing in my face. He said gently, "For most people, navigating their own psyche is like wandering in circles through a maze. That's what evolution has bequeathed us: a miserable, confusing prison. And the only thing crude drugs like cocaine or heroin or alcohol ever did was build short cuts to a few dead ends – or, like LSD, coat the walls of the maze with mirrors. And all that White Knights ever did was package the same effects differently."

"Grey Knights allow you to reshape the entire maze, at will. They don't confine you to some shrunken emotional repertoire; they empower you completely. They let you control exactly who you are."

I had to struggle to put aside the overwhelming sense of revulsion I felt. Largo had decided to fuck himself in the head; that was his problem. A few users of Mother would do the same – but one more batch of poisonous shit to compete with all the garbage from the basement labs wasn't exactly a national tragedy.

Largo said affably, "I spent 30 years as someone I despised. I was too weak to change – but I never quite lost sight of what I wanted to become. I used to wonder if it would have been less contemptible, less hypocritical, to resign myself to the fact of my weakness, the fact of my corruption. But I never did."

"And you think you've erased your old personality,

as easily as you erased your computer files? What are you now, then? A saint? An angel?"

"No. But I'm exactly what I want to be. With Grey Knights, you can't really be anything else."

I felt giddy for a moment, light-headed with rage; I steadied myself against the bars of my cage.

I said, "So you've scrambled your brain, and you feel better. And you're going to live in this fake jungle for the rest of your life, collaborating with drug pushers, kidding yourself that you've achieved redemption?"

"The rest of my life? Perhaps. But I'll be watching the world. And hoping."

I almost choked. "Hoping for what? You think your habit will ever spread beyond a few brain-damaged junkies? You think Grey Knights are going to sweep across the planet and transform it beyond recognition? Or were you lying—is the virus really infectious, after all?"

"No. But it gives people what they want. They'll seek it out, once they understand that."

I gazed at him, pityingly. "What people want is food, sex and power. That will never change. Remember the passage you marked in *Heart of Darkness*? What do you think that meant? Deep down, we're just animals with a few simple drives. Everything else is less than chaff in a breeze."

Largo frowned, as if trying to recall the quote, then nodded slowly. He said, "Do you know how many different ways an ordinary human brain can be wired? Not an arbitrary neural network of the same size—but an actual, working *Homo sapiens* brain, shaped by real embryology and real experience? There are about ten-to-the-power-of-ten-million possibilities. A huge number: a lot of room for variation in personality and talents, a lot of space to encode the traces of different lives.

"But do you know what Grey Knights do to that number? They multiply it by the same again. They grant the part of us that was fixed, that was tied to 'human nature,' the chance to be as different from person to person as a lifetime's worth of memories.

"Of course Conrad was right. Every word of that passage was true—when it was written. But now it doesn't go far enough. Because now, all of human nature is less than chaff in a breeze. 'The horror', the heart of darkness, is less than chaff in a breeze. All the 'eternal verities'—all the sad and beautiful insights of all the great writers from Sophocles to Shakespeare—are less than chaff in a breeze."

I lay awake on my bunk, listening to the cicadas and frogs, wondering what Largo would do with me. If he didn't see himself as capable of murder, he wouldn't kill me—if only to reinforce his delusions of self-mastery. Perhaps he'd just dump me outside the research station—where I could explain to Madelaine Smith how the Colombian air force pilot had come down with an El Nido virus in midair, and I'd valiantly tried to take control.

I thought back over the incident, trying to get my story straight. The pilot's body would never be recovered; the forensic details didn't have to add up.

I closed my eyes and saw myself breaking his neck. The same twinge of remorse passed over me. I brushed it aside irritably. So I'd killed him—and the girl, a few





# Horribly Beautiful, Beautifully Horrible

Josef Nesvadba

**W**e had to pass through the Iron Curtain, about which we had heard so much from previous expeditions. It was not a literal curtain of iron, but a system of holorays that wouldn't permit anything metallic to pass through: no equipment, no computers and, of course, no weapons. We found ourselves becalmed within it, unable to take a single step forward; the only solution was to take off our clothes and continue our journey naked. Once on the other side, though, we all felt cold and had difficulty breathing the planet's smog-filled atmosphere.

We walked across a foul desert plain from which strange and stunted hills emerged here and there, like the finger-bones of a huge skeleton. Only the crests of these finger-like hills were inhabited by living beings; the natives had evidently abandoned the cities and villages of the plain because of the smog. We found many of these abandoned settlements, all in ruins, as though they had suffered some long and bloody conflict. In some of the derelict dwellings we found coats and dirty suits to cover our nakedness. We felt warmer then, but we looked rather silly, like the retreating soldiers of a beaten army.

At least, we thought, they won't be afraid of us.

Thus clad, we undertook the arduous climb to the summit of one of the digital hills, and eventually arrived at the gate of the natives' new abode. It looked like a medieval town. The towns in the plain had been much more advanced. A queue had formed before the gate, made up of suspicious characters like ourselves. They were being examined one by one by guards who were armed with swords and shields. Our commander decided that someone should be sent ahead to find out exactly what was going on. "Someone" turned out to be me.

**W**hen I approached the queue it became clear that the guards were doing their job mechanically, without paying much attention. Now and then they would examine a bag or reach into a pocket if something aroused their suspicions, but their efficiency was limited by the fact that each of them had only one arm. At first, I thought they must be casualties of the recent war of destruction. I selected out an old man who was riding on a donkey, and tried to slip into the town with him, half-hidden by the animal, but it didn't work:

"Stop!"

I felt the edge of a blade upon my neck. The guard who had stopped me was about 50 years old. His left

eye was twice as big as the right, and he had a wooden leg. He limped with me to a nearby guardroom. I noticed a big drum and trumpet near the entrance, apparently for summoning help in emergencies. How could such primitive equipment exist alongside the holorays of the Curtain? Had they lost the expertise which had produced the Curtain so soon?

The guard shoved me forwards. I tried to limp the way he did, hoping to attract sympathy by the ploy – and also to conceal from him the fact that I could run away any time I wanted. When we entered the guardroom he locked the door through which we had come and indicated that I should wait. His manner wasn't at all menacing. He behaved like someone who was thoroughly bored by his job. He slowly detached his armour, having first laid down his sword and shield in a corner. Then he opened another door, which led to an inner room.

The room was all white. Lots of sharp instruments hung on the walls, some of which were utterly unfamiliar to me. I felt someone touch my neck, tenderly, on the same spot where the blade had touched me before. I had to turn around. Evidently there was a tiny wound on my neck, and the woman who had touched me was a nurse. She was horrible; I had never seen anyone so horrible in my entire life. I suppressed a cry of disgust.

She laughed at me, or so it seemed. She showed her coloured teeth. Her nose reminded me of a malformed pear. I couldn't see her eyes because they were covered by untidy, oily strands of hair. Her left cheek was swollen, as if she had just returned from the dentist. I was so shocked by her appearance that I couldn't help trying to move away, but she touched me again, this time more assertively. Her left hand was very strong indeed. Then I felt her squeezing my hip, painfully. Like everyone else, she seemed to have no right arm. She was dressed in a thin cloak without sleeves, which fell sheer from her shoulders. Her face reminded me of a hollowed-out beetroot of the kind with which we used to frighten one another in the days of my youth, placing a burning candle inside to illuminate the eye-holes. Her eyes seemed to be burning when I finally brought myself to look into them, as if she had a fever.

She attended to my wound with professional efficiency. When she had applied liniment to it I felt that it had instantly begun healing, as if by some miracle. Then she showed me to a wooden couch, which stood beneath the window beside an old-fashioned cup-

board. She began to undress me. She was quite disinterested, as if she were merely doing her daily duty. She executed the task skilfully. Now it was her turn to suppress a cry; when she removed my trousers she saw that I had underpants on, and for some reason this angered her. She tore them down with a single movement, as if wearing them were something indecent and abominable, threw them in the wastebin, and then began to explore my genitals with her hand.

Naturally enough, I tried to cover myself with both my own hands, like a shy boy, but this angered her all the more, and she pushed me down on the couch like a sack of potatoes. She sat on me, and pulled her cloak up about her waist. She was naked underneath. I recalled to mind the old argument about the possibility of women raping men; she proved very easily that such a thing is indeed possible. I was already aroused when she began to touch me, perhaps because of my long sexual abstinence – or perhaps because her horrible appearance somehow excited me? Her beetroot face was squarely in front of mine and this proved too much for me. My orgasm came swiftly.

Afterwards, she climbed down. I tried to rise, in order to follow her, but I couldn't move. Somehow, while we had intercourse, she had secured me with ropes intended for that purpose to the wooden legs of the couch, I remained where I was, naked and spread-eagled.

When I had been alone in the room for some time I began to feel thirsty. Eventually the woman came back, with a jar of hot liquid in her hand. The crippled guard was beside her; he was wearing an apron of some heavy material and was carrying some of the sharp instruments I had seen on the wall of the other room. He threw these into the air one by one and caught them again, like a juggler. He pointed with his chin to my right shoulder. The female rapist began to anoint the place he indicated with the liquid from her jar. It smelt abominable.

"Stop!" I shouted as loudly as I could. "I won't be mutilated. I don't want that. Stop!"

They seemed surprised.

"Don't worry," said my captor. "This is your chance. We know what we're doing. It won't take long." He sounded as if he thought he was doing me a favour.

While he was speaking he opened the door of a nearby cupboard. Neatly arrayed therein was a collection of right arms: long ones and short ones, fat ones and thin ones, with fingers clenched into fists or spread out as if trying to reach for safety.

I succeeded in liberating my own right hand from the knot which held it. I was ready for a fight. I was determined not to succumb so easily to him as I had to his horrible woman partner. I also contrived to free one of my feet. They hadn't secured me as safely as they had intended – or had my beetroot-faced lover meant me to get free?

"You're under no compulsion to become normal," she said, in a wounded tone – as if I'd just declined to accept a precious gift.

"Mind you, we don't tolerate monsters in our town!" said the surgeon solemnly. He stressed the word monsters. "You'll have to leave us immediately, and go back wherever you came from."

His voice sounded odd, as though he were a ventriloquist's dummy. He seemed to have lost all interest in me now that I had shown my true colours, and he returned to the other room, taking his instruments with him.

The woman disappeared into yet another room. I decided that I might need her again, and that I ought to say goodbye to her. I opened the door. It was small, no more than a closet. She was just changing her clothes, and had taken off her cloak. I saw her completely naked for the first time, and I realised that she *did* have a right arm, tightly bound to her torso. It was as white as an albino's arm, seemingly empty of blood. Evidently she felt it necessary to keep the arm perpetually concealed, just as our modest girls always covered their wombs, even on naturist beaches, with some kind of slip. She was immediately aware of what I had seen, and instantly became angry.

"Out! Get out!"

She tried to shut the door with her left hand and turned her backside to me in the meantime. She was quite beautiful when observed from that angle. I fled, but while I was on my way back to rejoin my companions I could think of nothing but her. Why did she behave as she did? Had they *all* maimed themselves as she had? If so, why?

While I was gone my friends had built a small encampment near the gates to the city. It had been easy enough; nobody seemed to care. They offered to send someone else next time instead of me, but everyone understood that this was a mere formality. I drank some of the water we had brought with us, bathed, and was soon ready to start out again. While I was returning to the camp I had observed several breaches in the city wall which were left entirely unguarded and so it was easy enough to return without going through the gate. It was abundantly clear that I was the best person to continue gathering information. After all, I had already an acquaintance in town: a girl-friend, for want of a better description.

I tried to remain unnoticed as I passed through the streets, concealing my right arm as best I could. Everybody about me was one-armed and further maimed to a greater or lesser degree. But nobody seemed to notice me. They had a curious, dreamlike appearance, and everyone seemed to be in a hurry. I did not have to wait long. My beetroot-faced lover ran out of her amputation workshop before dawn, her tour of duty evidently concluded. She was carrying a basket which contained fruit and wheat. I tried to stop her and speak to her but she, like all the rest, didn't seem to notice me. She ran away.

"I won't tell anybody about your right hand," I assured her, trying to calm her anxiety. "You needn't be ashamed. Back home, we're ashamed of our genitals in exactly the same way – or we used to be. Things will change here, too."

Her response was to increase her speed. I had to run after her. I was afraid someone would be suspicious. The streets of this town were like medieval alleyways, narrow and wet, full of nasty mud. I lost her when she disappeared without warning into a nearby house. It had two storeys, and was protected by heavy gates. The gates were shut in my face with a loud clang.

I decided to keep the house under observation for a time. While I watched, a window above my head was illuminated. I wondered whether she was changing her clothes, or liberating her colourless right hand from its prison. There was a balcony in front of the window, only several metres away from me. Should I climb up, like Romeo, to see my beetroot Juliet? I couldn't make up my mind, and while I hesitated I fell into the hands of another patrolling guardman.

I thought he was going to arrest me for a second time and bring me to another amputation room. This one was missing a leg, and he had no teeth. He couldn't see my right arm, but he bellowed something incomprehensible, pointing with his chin to a public house across the street from the home of my woman-friend. Apparently, he couldn't understand what I was doing on the street, when the public house was so close.

When I entered the place, though, I thought that I had made a mistake about its nature. It seemed to me that it had the air of a waiting-room or a church – some place, at any rate, where people expect changes, sensations, even miracles. I went through the door at the same time as two female dwarfs. The first one had only one breast, while the second was hunchbacked, thus having protuberances both front and back. They immediately joined a queue. People were standing one behind the other in a row, like sardines in a tin. They were waiting to get to the bar in front of them, making progress one step at a time – but they were very slow steps indeed. At the bar, everyone received a pinch of white powder. They all swallowed it immediately, then ran like mad to rejoin the end of the queue, to wait their turn to receive yet another pinch. In the meantime, they had sexual intercourse: all of them!

The line consisted almost exclusively of pairs, most of them heterosexual, although there were a few homosexual couples, both male and female. They had little difficulty achieving congress, because the cloaks they were wearing posed no obstacle at all. Their cohabitations seemed to be a way of whiling away the time as they waited for their doses of the drug. The positions which they adopted were various, but no one – or very few, at any rate – bothered to lie down to assume the missionary position; mostly they coupled animal-fashion, while standing up. The lazy, the old and the fat, who were few in number, simply masturbated one another while they stood in line, inching forward step by step. I had never seen such an exhibition of exotic genitalia in my entire life – and such a scarcity of hands! There were women with rabbit-like, bear-like and elephant-like vaginas, men with penises in the shape of cylinders, pendulums, spears and hammers. They had sex quite promiscuously, as though it were the most natural and commonplace way to behave in a public house.

I, of course, had to flee again; that became necessary as soon as the first lady dwarf let her hand wander around my backside and tried to locate my penis. I knew that she too would be appalled by my underpants, which I had put on again, idiot that I am, as soon I returned to the camp. I knew that she would recognize me as a foreigner immediately. Luckily, she let me go and I ran to the toilets. I threw the underpants away as soon as I could. I also threw my pants in the corner, and returned wearing only my shirt,

whose tails covered my waist in the old baby-doll style. Nobody noticed. The lady dwarf had gained two steps during my disappearance, and was now busily attending to a newcomer. I decided to get out, and left the room, followed by the puzzled glances of people who couldn't understand that I would so readily forsake what everyone in town treasured so highly. I never discovered what effect the drug had.

After this, it was obvious that I couldn't remain on the street alone for long. Clearly, I had to climb that balcony to reach my "beloved," as is customary in every love story penned since classical times. I was successful; it wasn't very high.

She sat behind the window, weeping quiet tears.

"I knew that you would come..."

She was quick to embrace me – but I started back reflexively. She was so very beautiful, now!

She started to weep again.

"Don't be surprised," she said. "Yes, I'm a monster like you. All the rest is mere illusion..."

She showed me the pear-stone, by which means she had transformed one nostril of her beautiful nose into something vaguely resembling an elephant's trunk, and the wig of dirty hair, whose strands she had dangled before her beautiful green eyes, and the pieces of charcoal which she used to draw artificial wrinkles on her face.

"I have to pretend to be normal. That's why I hide my arm, too."

There was another fruit-stone, which she carried in her mouth in order to deform her cheek and distort her speech.

I tried to calm her down. I touched her gently. She aroused me now much more than when she had raped me at the beginning. I wanted to kiss her, for the first time. She didn't seem to understand. Perhaps, I thought, she doesn't know what a kiss is. Perhaps they only have rough sex here.

Suddenly, the whole room was brightly lit. In the doorway stood a rather ordinary man, devoid of expression. His right arm had been amputated, but the wound of his shoulder was not yet properly healed.

"My husband," she whispered, without moving a muscle.

"Dinner's ready downstairs!" announced the man, a little too loudly. He pretended not to see me. Perhaps he doesn't care, I thought, that I was just going to kiss his wife, before his very eyes.

We went down the stairs. Almost every other tread was loose. It was risky using them. The doors downstairs couldn't be properly closed, and the table was shaky. Only the dishes were in good order. Were those the last traces of old times? But they bore only wheat-grains and lettuce-leaves. We had to chew the grains. Perhaps it was healthy enough, but not very tasty. There were two more people sitting at the table: a decrepit couple wearing dark glasses. They didn't dare to speak. They were obviously parents.

"You can stay with us," said the husband, after chewing for a while, as though he had decided to recognize me as a colleague, "but only tonight. Tomorrow you'll have to leave. I don't like problems."

His spoon was broken, and he had to pick up his food with his fingers.

Later, he took me down into the cellar, perhaps to separate me from his wife. Here, nothing worked at all. It was a store-room full of ruined things, and even though there were two beds in the room I had to sleep on the floor. I wondered why they never repaired anything. Many of the objects around me could have been repaired without much effort. I tried to fix one of the beds, and then turned my attention to the door. While I was working on the door it opened. There she stood, all in white, like an angel. She had washed herself, and put on some perfume. Now she was like one of the models from back home.

She sat beside me, and spoke in a dogged tone. "I want you! I want to live with you. I intend to put a stop to this masquerade. I'd rather live underground, as a monster among monsters, the way I was born, than let others mutilate me or hide my true appearance all the time."

As she spoke she raised both of her hands, showing me the right one with some pride. The arm wasn't wholly disabled after all. She had even put some make-up on it.

"But I don't understand!" I complained. "We all have two hands where I come from. The vast majority of people use their right one to produce things, fix and repair them. Life is easier with them, you know. The furniture in this room could easily be repaired, if only the workman had two hands."

"Nobody here has a second arm on his right side," she told me. "When such a monster is born, the arm has to be amputated, as we offered to do for you. If not, the defect has to be hidden, like mine. Otherwise, you have to go to live with the other malformed beings, under the ground."

She showed me a trap-door in the middle of the cellar floor.

"Under terrible conditions," she added, with a shiver. At the same time she tried with both of her hands to fix a chair in front of her. The arm rest had only to be set back in place. She succeeded instantly. I had to applaud her.

"Life isn't terrible when you have both hands – it's easier!" I said triumphantly.

I wanted to show her more of what my right hand was good for, but at that moment her husband intruded again. This time, he was furious. The sight of us repairing the chair made him very angry – in stark contrast to the sight of us making love earlier that evening.

"You bitch! You faithless bitch!" he cried, and started to kick her. "You monster, you crazy monster! You'll destroy yourself and all of us!"

She retreated before him, silent again. I wanted to show her that you can fight with both hands, but he was armed. In his left hand he held a kind of gun, which he fired.

I felt nothing but a very slight impact, but I lost consciousness. My last mental impression was the puzzling revelation that he was not at all jealous in a sexual sense, but deeply resentful of our collaborative endeavour.

When I awoke again they were both gone. I looked at the trap-door she had pointed out to me. Who had she said was living underground? Beings similar to me? Shouldn't I try to con-

tact them? But first I had to find her, to save her from her primitive husband, although I had no idea where he might have taken her.

Nothing like this had ever happened to me before. All thought of further exploration had been driven out of my head. Compared to my feelings for the woman, all else had become unimportant. I was in love, for the first time.

I ran upstairs. Both parents were sitting at the table, quite motionless, as they had the day before. But they had had a shock, and now they both started to speak at the same time, clamorously. The woman was apparently their daughter; the husband was no husband at all; he was a foreigner, who had been operated on several weeks before, in the same amputation room from which I had escaped. He had fallen in love with their daughter and had been living here ever since. But he was afraid all the time, obeying the rules scrupulously because he didn't want to lose the privileges he had gained by coming here. Life in the plains from which he had come must be frightful indeed; that was the reason, they said, why he took the rules so seriously.

"What rules?" I wanted to know.

There was a rule, apparently, that everyone who simply hid his or her right hand had to be brought to the Castle for further treatment. Anyone sheltering such a monster was punishable by law, and could also be exiled from town. It was simple enough to find the Castle, they told me. It was in the main square.

I found a desolate square in the centre of the town, rectangular in shape. The old-fashioned buildings which lined it seemed to be derelict, with the sole exception of the castle, which had not quite fallen into ruins. The castle was evidently inhabited: two soldiers with swords and shields stood in front of the baroque gate. Each of them had only one hand: the left.

"You can't come through if you don't know the password," one of them told me, while the other one extended his sword to touch my neck on the usual spot. Evidently, they were trained to do that.

"You can't see your beloved just now," continued the man who had spoken. "But the boss would like to see you. Follow me."

"The boss" turned out to be the guardsman I had first encountered at the gate of the city, who had been so regretful at the failure of his attempt at vivisection. He stared at me with his right eye, which was now twice as big as his left, and moved the fingers of his left hand as though he were scratching the skin of his non-existent right forearm.

"I would never have let you enter the town if I had foreseen the effect it would have on poor Roobee," he said. Evidently this was the name of my beloved, who had reminded me of a beetroot when I first met her. "But she will be cured now she is here, you have my word for that. And you shall have the privilege of spending a few moments with the Emperor. He wants to speak to you."

He led me out of his room and into the depths of the castle. We passed through long corridors, where the officers and clerks of the castle were stationed according to their ranks and degrees of infirmity. The ground

floor was staffed by the one-legged and the lightly maimed, the first floor by those without both legs or with head injuries, while men with artificial limbs who supported themselves on crutches were assembled under the roof. There, on high, the throne-room of the Emperor was placed. I was sent in to confront him.

"We know that you and your companions have come to us as ambassadors," said the Emperor. "We know that you represent species akin to ours which are scattered throughout the galaxy – intelligent species."

The Emperor paused before continuing, and groaned. He was slumped on his neglected throne, a white-haired, dirty-faced ancient with only one hand, trembling as if in the throes of Parkinson's disease.

"But that's your problem," he went on. "We don't need to make contact, because we're more intelligent than you are. We have passed beyond the stage of technical civilization, of which space is merely the last symptom. We, fortunately, have transcended all the horrors of the brain's left hemisphere. All your troubles, did you but know it, are created by work, and by your abominable habit of using your right hands to do it. We, by contrast, have elected to cultivate our left hands and the right hemispheres of our brains. By this means we have solved all our ecological problems and avoided petty conflicts. We live nowadays in a peaceful, calm and truly beautiful world. This is the message we wish you to take back with you. You can go now. You can all go home."

In the corridor the guardsman was waiting. "You didn't believe him, I hope?" he said, winking at me with his bigger eye. "All that stuff about hemispheres is just humbug and propaganda."

All at once he began to seem more human. He led me away to a quiet corner, and started to whisper like a conspirator. "I know, you see, because I'm the minister of the interior. I serve as a guard now and again just to be able to keep an eye on my subordinates. I know everything about everything—even you. I know your name, your age and your address. I even know when your mother died. Our civilization was not developed according to the dictates of the physiology of the brain, but because of our desire to attain equality. After the last big war huge numbers of people had been maimed in one way or other. As chance would have it, very many of them had lost their right arms – the arms with which they had been forced to fight. For this reason the idea became common that it was desirable and just for everyone to have only one hand. There have been other factions, of course: people whose faces were ruined by napalm wanted everyone to have a mutilated face, people whose genitals were torn off by mines desired to have every man castrated. There have been parties advocating one-breasted women, and organizations of toothless men – these consisting, of course, of those who sacrificed their teeth to the torturers. There are many roads to equality, you see, and uniformity wears many faces. But the one-handed form prevailed here, as was only natural. We became a nation of one-armed invalids, hungry and maimed, dirty and ugly. Thus our kingdom evolved, and so it continues. We can afford to take a liberal attitude to sex, and to drugs, while we reproduce our posterity, cloning our

deformity. We have justice and we have equality, without initiative and without strife. This is the real message you may deliver to your superiors. But be careful! You're being followed by my most able agents. Run away now..."

"But what will happen to her?" I wasn't prepared to give her up.

"To Beeroo?" He knew, somehow, the name by which I called her. Even that was known to him. "She belongs here. They will cure her. She will ask, of her free will to have her right arm amputated. I'll put it in my collection. There's no problem. Now run along, for the sake of your own safety." He stopped whispering and shouted the last order, as two crippled guardsmen appeared in the corridor.

I went away unhurriedly. I was followed by two shadows, as he had predicted. Why had he told me all this? Did he want to take revenge upon his own profession? Or was his only aim to sever my relationship with Beetroot?

I tried to make my way to the prison which had to be somewhere downstairs, but my shadows were too quick off the mark. A guardsman appeared before me. I had indeed to run, then. But I didn't intend to desert her!

That would hardly have been an appropriate ending to my love story.

**I** returned to her parents. After some persuasion they revealed how the trap door in their cellar could be opened. I hoped to find allies in the world below.

The way down into the underworld was very long. The finger-like hill on which the town of invalids was situated was high and steep; I soon realized that this was because it was built out of many strata of waste. There was a layer of household garbage, a layer of liquid waste and spent oils, a layer of the wrecks of cars and tools, and a layer of tins and containers. Only after clambering for a long time through increasingly narrow passages did I reach the last of the subterranean strata, which must have lain deep beneath the polluted plain. There it was that the people of the underworld lived.

Like frightened savages, clad in old-fashioned clothing that reminded me of home, which they had obviously inherited from earlier times when things were normal, they approached me. They were frightened but beautiful; this was an underworld of Belmondos and Lollobrigidas, Nicholsons and Bardots. They thought that I only wanted to hide among them, like everyone who had ever dared to enter their underground habitat before.

"Not at all!" I told them. "I have come to bring you a very important message. You need to hear this message more than my own people at home: You are not monsters! You are beautiful! That is my message. The monsters are those who live up above. You have more skill and craft than they do, because you each have two hands at your disposal. You can emerge from here and occupy the town at your leisure. There is a layer of discarded weapons somewhere up above, and they are not all as rotten as they seem. Anyway, you can repair them. Come, take them in your hands and follow me!"

In the afternoon of that same day we threw the living corpse of the Emperor out of the window, to break upon the stones. The one-eyed minister of the interior committed suicide. Beetroot's husband and a few diehards tried to defend the gateway to the prison from our beautiful mob, but disappeared beneath the vengeful tide. I won through to my beloved.

"I can't come away with you," she said, dreamily.

It was apparent that they had brainwashed her. She spouted a load of nonsense about the hemispheres of the human brain, and why the right one is more important for the cultivation of the arts; she was now perfectly prepared to give up her right arm.

"Nonsense!" I said. "Look around you..."

All the nurses and attendants in the ward where she was confined were ugly monsters.

"They are jealous of you! They simply cannot stand the fact that you are more beautiful than they. Because of beauty and talent there will never be equality between us. We are all different from one another, all talented in our various ways. Can't you understand that?"

I had to support her while I dragged her outside. I wanted to show her the army of Liberation, and the future which beckoned.

Outside, a Lollobrigida had already begun fighting with a Bardot; she had grabbed a fistful of blonde hair and was trying hard to scratch her eyes out. A Nicholson decided to help her, but he was prevented from so doing by a Belmondo. A Garbo and a Leigh appeared around a corner, half-naked and covered in blood. A Weismuller was roaring like Tarzan, and laying into everyone around him.

All my beautiful people had started to fight. At first it was only the townspeople, the cripples and the invalids, who felt the force of their wrath – but soon, bathed by the light of the sun of freedom, which shone proudly now above the planet, everyone was fighting his neighbour.

Blood ran in the streets of the town again.

Both of Beetroot's parents were killed. She consented at last to flee with me, heading for the gate of the town. We must reach the camp which my companions have built; it is our only hope.

If they try to stop us, I shall fight too. I shall defend her – if necessary, to the death.

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**Josef Nesvadba** lives in Prague and is the leading Czech sf/fantasy writer. He last appeared in *Interzone* with "The Storeroom of Lost Desire" (issue 30, July-August 1989) and since that story was written vast changes have overtaken his homeland as well as the rest of Central and Eastern Europe – changes which are perhaps reflected in the above piece. We are grateful to Brian Stableford for his assistance in "Englishing" Mr Nesvadba's latest story.

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## Interzone

Some back-issue highlights:

**No.29:** "Sex Wars" issue; stories by Greg Egan, Karen Joy Fowler, Garry Kilworth, etc.

**No.32:** Richard Calder's debut, "Mosquito," plus fiction by Barry Bayley, Ian McDonald

**No.34:** All new writers' issue, illustrated throughout by Ian Miller

**No.36:** Kim Newman's "Original Dr Shade" plus stories by Greg Egan, Simon Ings & others

**No.38:** Brian Aldiss issue, with interview by Colin Greenland, plus Greg Bear, etc.

**No.42:** All-female issue, with Pat Murphy, Lisa Tuttle, illustrated by Judith Clute

**No.43:** "In the Air," Newman & Byrne's first USSA story, plus Langford, Jeapes, etc.

**No.48:** All-star "Aboriginal" swap issue, with Brown, Egan, Griffith, McAuley, etc.

**No.50:** Stephen Baxter, Ian Lee & others, plus full index of first fifty issues

**No.53:** Fiction by Christopher Evans, Ian R. MacLeod; Jonathan Carroll interview

**No.56:** Ian Watson's "Coming of Vertumnus" plus Ballard, Di Filippo, Mapes, Webb, etc.

**No.58:** Our tenth anniversary issue, with Ballard, Storm Constantine, M. John Harrison

**No.60:** Fantasy issue, with Garry Kilworth's "The Sculptor"; Donaldson interview and more

**No.63:** David Garnett, Diane Mapes, Ian Watson; Greenland & Sheckley interviews

**No.66:** Eugene Byrne's "Cyril the Cyberpig" plus Elizabeth Hand, John Sladek, etc.

**No.67:** Bob Shaw issue, with stories by Baxter, Blanchard, Harrison & Ings

**No.70:** Molly Brown, Keith Brooke, Nicola Griffith, Brian Stableford and others

All these issues are still in stock.

# A Blip on the Way to the Big Crunch

Arthur C. Clarke interviewed by Stan Nicholls

In the centre of Minehead, close to Exmoor, a row of Victorian houses overlooks the town's spacious park. About midway along the terrace of elegant, three-storey buildings stands one distinguished by an unobtrusive white plaque. It reads:

Arthur C. Clarke  
the Science Fiction Writer  
Radio and T.V. Personality  
was born in this  
house in 1917.

When Clarke was a child, Minehead was one third its present size; a genteel, middle-class seaside resort surrounded by vast tracts of farm land. He grew up in a culture where the Great War had depleted the male population of western Europe by almost 20 percent, and horsepower was still, literally, a main motive force. Radio, yet to challenge newsprint's dominance, was as embryonic a medium as the movies, which would not find their voice until he was ten years old.

And science fiction was at least a decade short of recognition as a discrete literary form.

The changes the world's most famous living sci-fi writer has seen in his time are immeasurable. The changes in the genre since he began his professional career in 1946, when *Astounding* published his first stories, have also been pretty profound. Speaking to Clarke on a line to his home in Colombo, capital of Sri Lanka, I asked him if he had any observations about the current state of science fiction, or its possible future directions.

"Well, I think my fiction has changed quite a lot over the years. But as far as the field generally is concerned, I can't really comment because I read very little of it now. Occasionally I get sent a story by somebody which has some relevance to me, and there are obviously a number of wonderful writers coming up, but I just don't have time to follow things that closely. I don't get any of the magazines except *Interzone*, to which I subscribe; and they still send me *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, but I've asked them to stop sending copies because I can't find time to read it.

"Having said that, I did start to read a story in *Asimov's* magazine the other day by a writer I admire very much, and just couldn't get past the first page because it was so full of, I thought, unnecessary sex and vulgarity. It may have been necessary in a way, I suppose, but I could have done without it. I guess that sort of explicitness is one change in the field. Of course there's an argument for saying that the only way to find the limits is to go beyond them."

One fairly consistent note in Clarke's fiction is optimism. The Earth portrayed in his latest novel, *The Hammer of God*, for example, is stumbling its way towards a utopia. Are optimistic futures a hope or a belief on his part? "There's certainly a considerable amount of wishful thinking in my work. Quite a few nasty things happen, or have happened, in my stories, mostly off-stage; but yes, I'm very much an optimist. I'm fond of quoting the late Sam Goldwyn – 'If you've got a message, use Western Union.' Yet I do have a message, which is that there are some desirable, pleasant futures we could have if we worked for them. And not get involved in the obvious mistakes which we're making right now, as you can see on your TV news every night."

The novel takes place in the comparatively near future of the 22nd century. Is it harder to do that, given there are more connections with now, than set a story in the far future? "I won't say it's harder. It's more dangerous. In fact I've often said half seriously that I try to write about the more distant future because it's safer – no one will contradict me!"

In the world of *Hammer of God*, Capitalism is following Communism into oblivion. "That's a very near future, I think," Clarke says. I agree there's a good argument for the possibility but, again, does it represent a hope for him? That Humanity could sweep away the existing structures and come up with a totally new kind of world political and social order?

"I'm a very apolitical animal. I believe that almost any political system, could

function well if there are decent people working it. As long as there's democracy, and justice, I don't think it really matters what the political system is. Although some systems perhaps are more prone to produce democracy and justice than others."

But the novel does seem to imply that the time is ripe for a new system, one that maybe takes the best elements from our existing Left/Right political set-up. "Yes, I think I was suggesting that. I'm reminded of Winston Churchill's famous remark: 'Democracy's the worst political system. Except for all the others.' And I've often told my Greek friends that Greece tried every political system and couldn't make any of them work."

"You won't be surprised to hear that I put some hope in the information networks we're developing. The trouble with political systems in the past is that they've never had the information necessary to run them properly. Now at least in principle we can have the information we need to know what's going on and what should be done. Of course, the danger is that we might be so overwhelmed with not information but data that we find ourselves back to square one."

Is this a way of saying the new technologies could be one way of making it harder for totalitarian regimes to arise? "I don't know. As I've discussed in various places, notably my non-fiction book *When the World Was One*, would Hitler have survived TV? I rather doubt it. McCarthy didn't. But with information technology increasingly in the hands of ordinary citizens, and good communications every which way, we at least shorten the odds on having democracy. Look at what happened in Russia. In the late Soviet Union it was communications which enabled the revolution to take place. Particularly the fax machines and satellites."

In the introduction to his recent book *By Space Obsessed*, Clarke refers to "the perils of prediction," and despite assuring his place in the history books by foreseeing the communications satellite back in the late 1940s,



Arthur Clarke's birthplace in Minehead

firmly rejects any role for prophecy in sf. "It's not a function of the genre at all, as I've always been careful to point out. Science fiction is, one, entertainment, and two, extrapolation. I entirely agree with Ray Bradbury when he said, 'I don't attempt to predict the future, I attempt to prevent it.' I always deny being a prophet, except to a very limited extent in non-fiction and in technology. But it's only fair to say that when science fiction does go in for prediction it's not always wrong. It's usually wrong. Although it's much more right than any other form of fiction."

"The other side of this coin is the assumption, often made by non-sf readers, that technology has advanced to such a level there's nothing left for the genre to explore. As soon as we got to the Moon, people said, 'That's the end of science fiction.' I remember a newspaper editorial soon after Apollo, headed, 'The Day Science Fiction Died.' Of course, there are myriad possibilities for sf in all sorts of areas – in the fields of virtual reality and cybernetics, for example – some of which have already come and gone in the literature. I'm sure there will be infinite room for imaginative fiction until the Big Crunch."

His reference to Apollo makes me wonder how he felt about the American government's recent decision to postpone a number of NASA's more ambitious projects, including the Mars

mission. "In the long-term it will certainly be a temporary blip. As it happens, I dictated a letter to Dr George Miller, who really ran the Apollo programme, just today. It congratulates him on his forthcoming 70th birthday, and goes on to say that although we're both sorry a lot of our hopes haven't come off, nevertheless we've seen so much happen in our lifetimes. Infinitely more than we ever dreamed was possible. Life has no sense of disappointment whatsoever. But I am sorry for the young people who trained as astronauts and hoped to go to Mars, or even back to the Moon – even to the Moon! – because they must have a feeling of disappointment. But from the point of view of history, what's ten, twenty years? Indeed, what's a century in the course of history?"

Clarke has always advocated the peaceful uses of space exploration, and with the Cold War now over would like to see less involvement by the military. At the same time, he's a pragmatist. "We wouldn't have had a space programme, we wouldn't have gone to the Moon, without the military input. Unfortunately, that's the way it is. I mean, the V2 was the stepping-stone into space."

"I'll say one good word for the military, though – their reconnaissance satellites have had a tremendous impact on preserving the peace. I'm all in favour of them. As you doubtless

know, I had a bit of a fight with my old friend Bob Heinlein over this Star Wars [SDI] business. I'm glad that the crazier schemes – putting an umbrella over the United States, for instance, which was utter nonsense – have vanished. Some of those more ridiculous notions are now part of history. But there are quite a few things which we must continue to do. It's a dangerous world and a lot of nasty people are likely to have nuclear weapons and delivery systems, and I'm afraid a certain amount of military application and study has to carry on."

**T**he *Hammer of God* contains an element that has long permeated Clarke's fiction, and which on the face of it sits incongruously with his scrupulous adherence to hard-nosed scientific accuracy – a concern with religious and spiritual matters. Even the asteroid that threatens to wipe out the Earth is named after Kali, the Hindu god of destruction. "Yes, it's a perennial theme," he confirms, "and it goes back to *Childhood's End*, probably. It's specific in *The Songs of Distant Earth*, where I've got a chapter called 'Whatever Gods May Be'; and also *The Fountains of Paradise*. Two of my best-known short stories, 'The Star' and 'The Nine Billion Names of God,' have religious themes. Also, I've occasionally written non-fiction on the subject, such as my essay 'Credo,' which will be reprinted in my next collection but one. And of course I remember saying to Stanley Kubrick, and it's often been quoted, that 2001 was the first ten million-dollar religious movie. I'm fascinated by Humanity's need for a spiritual dimension, and I suppose my attitude to this is best summed-up in something I once heard someone say – 'I don't believe in God, but I'm very interested in Her!'"

Chrislam, the religious sect in *Hammer of God*, employs virtual reality to spread its message – a plausible extension of televangelist's use of the media today. Was Clarke utilizing sf to highlight a contemporary situation? "Any writing, whether it's science fiction or not, must inevitably be grounded in the here and now. Just as all extraterrestrial creatures in sf are always based on existing zoology; I don't think anyone's ever created a totally alien entity."

I meant in terms of social comment about now. "Many of fiction's famous utopias and dystopias were at least subconsciously commenting on the cultures their writers lived in. The classic ones of course were *Gulliver's Travels*, *Nineteen Eight-Four*, *Brave New World*. But even when it isn't specifically in that genre, quite often science fiction does have something to say about the present. Even the things it avoids saying may be a commentary on the present. An example of that was a

lot of the Russian science fiction written in the last 50 years, which was almost inevitably a commentary, if often by omission, on the Soviet system."

When Colin Greenland reviewed *The Hommer of God* in *The Sunday Times*, he finished by saying, "Clarke's work is fantasy as pure and consoling as J.R.R. Tolkien's." What was his reaction to that? "First shock, then amusement, then admiration at such a perceptive comment. His impression that *Hommer of God* is fantasy in the Tolkien sense is a very interesting point.

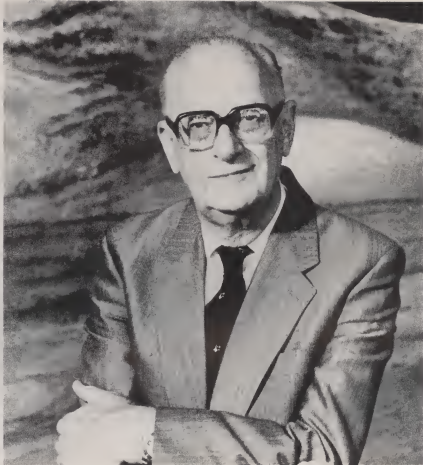
"Unfortunately, I only read about one fiction book a year these days; I guess my memory circuits are just saturated because I've read so much. But on the very rare occasions I do, I usually enjoy fantasy as much as hard science fiction — *The Lord of the Rings* is one of the few books I've read three times now. Also I've written quite a lot of what you might call fantasy. Take *'The Nine Billion Names of God.'* I mean, it has to be a fantasy; no one believes the stars will go out like that. In fact the debate going on at the moment about this year's Arthur C. Clarke Award seems to touch on this point specifically. As you know, there's been a big fight going on about the award, and I wrote to *Interzone* about it [see issue 76]."

I'm interested in his thoughts on the subject, as Marge Piercy winning with *Body of Glass* has caused such a controversy in British sf circles. "And I don't even know why," Clarke states.

Is he aware of the objections? "I haven't the faintest idea."

I tell him I think the criticism boils down to two things, neither having much to do with a perception of the novel as fantasy. First, that it wasn't the best book on an otherwise strong short-list, and second, that it's peripheral science fiction. "We're back to this old argument about what is science fiction, aren't we? I read the first couple of chapters of the book, and it was pure, one hundred percent sf. What happens beyond that, I don't know. But if it continued in that vein, there's no argument."

There's a feeling, I suggest, that *Body of Glass* is a mainstream novel dressed as science fiction, and a suspicion that in choosing it the judges were attempting to curry favour outside the field. "Okay, some people may think Ben Bova's *Mars* or Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars*, both of which I've read incidentally, and they're excellent, should have taken precedence. Well, that's a debatable point. But once you've got judges you must abide by their decision. I take the cynical view that if an award generates controversy it's good for the medium, and that's fine. It's one of the arguments that's always been raised for the Oscars — nobody ever agrees with the award, or maybe once every ten years,



Arthur C. Clarke

but the general feeling is that the Oscars are good for the film industry.

"Perhaps other authors feel there are very good grounds for them having won the award this year. Maybe if *Hommer of God* doesn't win next year I'll feel that way myself!"

Clarke's mention of the Oscars leads me to ask him whether he thinks modern sf cinema accurately reflects the state of the literature. "It's always been quite distinct from the literature, and most of the films have been very degenerate forms of entertainment as far as the writing's concerned. But the effects these days are marvellous. Look at *Terminator 2*, for example, which was really wonderful.

"It's only just in the last week that I've seen *Star Trek — The Undiscovered Country*, by the way. I thought the philosophy behind that was a very good way to end the series and a splendid tribute to Gene [Roddenberry]. You know, ending on that sort of mature political note which says we've had enough of war, blood and blowing things up, and it's time we became civilized people. Or civilized entities, rather.

"That kind of message has always been present in *Star Trek*, but never so explicitly. And the collapse of the Soviet empire really triggered the theme. Or made it acceptable, you might say."

Arguably, one aspect the movies tend to lose is what might be called the wonder factor, an element that made Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama*, for example, so appealing. Would he agree that, in order to maintain intrigue, there is a point beyond which a writer should not go? "Some knowledge is not meant for man," yes. You have a point, and one of the criticisms of *Odyssey 2* was that I'd removed some of the mystery from the first book, and from the movie. Okay, that's a valid argument. But there will always be mysteries."

Clarke and his collaborator, Gentry Lee, have now published the fourth in the Rama sequence, *Rama Revealed*, and it will definitely be the last of the series. "Gentry is now writing a series of books on his own," Clarke explains, "some of which are based on backgrounds we thought of together, although they'll be entirely his. I'm very happy with the way things came out. Gentry developed enormously during the process of writing the books, and I learnt a lot from him. I don't think I could have written — well, I know I couldn't have written *The Hammer of God* without Gentry's input.

I got on with Gentry from the moment [film producer] Peter Guber brought him out to Sri Lanka in 1986, just two weeks after the *Challenger* disaster. Gentry was Chief Engineer on

Project Galileo at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Director of Mission Planning for the Viking landers and worked with Carl Sagan on the Cosmos TV series, so he couldn't have come with higher credentials."

How did the collaboration actually work? "It began with *Cradle*, of course. That was the deepest immersion, when we holed ourselves up in a mountain retreat in the middle of Sri Lanka with our computer and simply pounded out ideas. Then we met from time to time, but most of it was done by correspondence on fax machines. Now, collaboration is even easier, if you have e-mail or whatever.

"Working with Gentry meant planning things out quite carefully. As far as my solo writing's concerned, planning is impossible because I get so many visitors and this is a busy household, although I do have a schedule which I stick to fairly well. I'm very disciplined, in other words; I can hammer away at things even when I don't feel like it, and get them done. The difference between amateurs and professionals is that an amateur can't do it even when he feels like it and a professional can even when he doesn't."

So how does he go about conceiving and starting a new book? "I honestly don't know. This may sound like a strange thing to say, but I don't remember ever writing anything. It's like a hole in my life. It's like automatic writing, as though I just plug in and become a writing machine. It all happens I guess on a subconscious level, and feels more like reporting than creating. Where it is conscious it can be very hard work. It was in the case of *Garden of Rama*, where I spent a lot of time arranging all the elements. I wrote the novel quite quickly, in two or three weeks I think, but then I had all these different elements and for a long time I was juggling them. What was the optimum arrangement? What order should it be in to get the greatest impact? That aspect can require a great deal of work and a lot of shuffling of cards."

Writing is an instinctive process for him? "I think that's a very good description. Once I sit down at the word processor it's automatic and instinctive. It takes quite a lot of will-power sometimes to get to that stage, you know; flying by the seat of your pants. But the instinctive level always kicks in."

I remind him that when *Fountains of Paradise* came out in 1979, he announced it would be his last work of fiction. "Oh, I've said that from time to time. I was very ill then and thought it might be my last work of anything. When I finish a book I'm in post-career exhaustion and hate the idea of having to do another one. I tend to refer to anything I write as my latest last

book. But at the moment I've got exactly one hundred projects on my schedule."

An incredible workload. He gives me a run-down on some of them. "Well, there's *The Snows of Olympus*, a book about Mars I've been working on for two years; a collection of pieces about diving, *Sinking Slowly in the East* - I call that my aquabiography - and *The Colours of Infinity*, which gathers together all the essays I've written in the last decade. Those will be out over the next two or three years, all from Gollancz. But no fiction, because I'm involved in too many other things, most of which will hopefully be cancelled or fall through. But I'm afraid a lot of them won't."

"In addition to the books, there are 40 or 50 television programmes. That's 26 episodes of *Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious Universe*, and 26 based on my short stories, for an as yet untitled drama series. Columbia are doing a TV pilot called *The Rama Tapestry*, so we'll see what happens with that. I recently realized that *Childhood's End* has been optioned for nearly 35 years now. One day they may make it. The *Songs of Distant Earth* was optioned some years ago and the whole thing fell through. But at the moment Mike Oldfield is writing a musical suite based on it. He dropped in to see me a couple of months ago and he's now in LA working on it."

"I'll be very disappointed if *The Hammer of God* isn't optioned, and it's out to market at the moment. I just hope the momentum hasn't been lost with the change-over of my American agent. I've moved from Scott Meredith [joining an exodus of science-fiction authors from the troubled agency in recent months] and now I'm primarily represented by David Higham, which is working through the new American agency Scovill Chichak Galen where necessary. Scott Meredith still handle all my existing contracts, and fortunately everybody's on excellent terms with each other."

"I'm also starting to get involved in CD-ROMs. Two companies want to do my biography [Neil McAleer's *Odyssey*] and a bibliography."

In the mid-1980s Clarke was diagnosed as having a debilitating medical condition which affects his central nervous system. How is his health at the moment? "I'm feeling fine, but I'm very limited by the fact that I can't walk very much without assistance, and have to have physiotherapy every day. So it's a nuisance moving around. But I don't have to now, thanks to my gadgets."

And Sri Lanka. In view of the troubles in recent years is it still as safe and comfortable a place to live as when he moved there in 1956? "Yes, I'm happy to say. Things are much calmer now. In fact, for the first time in years, we

recently went across to the east coast, where we have a diving motel, to check up on conditions there. Except for a medical emergency, I don't expect to leave Sri Lanka again."

That discreet plaque, marking the house where Arthur C. Clarke was born, was installed during the Minehead Space Age Festival, held in July 1992 in celebration of the author's 75th birthday. Among those in attendance were Gentry Lee, John Brunner, Patrick Moore, Terry Pratchett, Neil McAleer and Clarke himself.

Perhaps he reflected, on revisiting his childhood haunts, how far the world has advanced in the previous three-quarters of a century. From steamship to jet, train to spaceprobe, telegraph to videophone. And if he walked to the end of the street of his birth his eye might have been drawn to another house, not dissimilar to his former family home. A house bearing a symbol which sums up more succinctly than any other the progress achieved in the span of a single lifetime.

A solitary, pristine white satellite dish, pointing to the stars.

*The Hammer of God* (hb, £14.99). Clarke and Gentry Lee's *Rama Revealed* (hb, £15.99) and Neil McAleer's *Odyssey* (pb, £5.99) are all published by Gollancz. The first three Rama books are published in paperback by Orbit.

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# Lieserl

## Stephen Baxter

**L**ieserl was suspended inside the body of the Sun. She spread her arms wide and lifted up her face. She was deep within the Sun's convective zone, the broad mantle of turbulent material beneath the glowing protosphere; convective cells larger than the Earth, tangled with ropes of magnetic flux, filled the world around her. She could hear the roar of the great convective founts, smell the stale photons diffusing out towards space from the remote fusing core.

She felt as if she were inside some huge cavern. Looking up she could see how the protosphere formed a glowing roof over her world perhaps fifty thousand miles above her, and the boundary of the inner radiative zone was a shining, impenetrable floor another fifty thousand miles beneath.

*Lieserl? Can you hear me? Are you all right?*

The capcom. It sounded like her mother's voice, she thought.

She thrust her arms down by her sides and swooped up, letting the floor and roof of the cavern-world wheel around her. She opened up her senses, so that she could feel the turbulence as a whisper against her skin, the glow of hard photons from the core as a gentle warmth against her face.

*Lieserl? Lieserl?*

She remembered how her mother had enfolded her in her arms. "The Sun, Lieserl. The Sun..."

**E**ven at the moment she was born she knew something was wrong.

A face loomed over her: wide, smooth, smiling. The cheeks were damp, the glistening eyes huge. "Lieserl. Oh, Lieserl..."

*Lieserl. My name, then.*

She explored the face before her, studying the lines around the eyes, the humorous upturn of the mouth, the strong nose. It was an intelligent, lived-in face. This is a good human being, she thought. Good stock...

*Good stock? What am I thinking of?*

This was impossible. She felt terrified of her own explosive consciousness. She shouldn't even be able to focus her eyes yet...

She tried to touch her mother's face. Her own hand was still moist with amniotic fluid – but it was growing visibly, the bones extending and broadening, filling out the loose skin like a glove.

She opened her mouth. It was dry, her gums already sore with budding teeth.

She tried to speak.

Her mother's eyes brimmed with tears. "Oh, Lieserl. My impossible baby."

Strong arms reached beneath her. She felt weak, helpless, consumed by growth. Her mother lifted her up, high in the air. Bony adult fingers dug into the aching flesh of her back; her head lolled backwards, the expanding muscles still too weak to support the burgeoning weight of her head. She could sense other adults surrounding her, the bed in which she'd been born, the outlines of a room.

She was held before a window, with her body tipped forward. Her head lolled; spittle laced across her chin.

An immense light flooded her eyes.

She cried out.

Her mother enfolded her in her arms. "The Sun, Lieserl. The Sun..."

**T**he first few days were the worst. Her parents – impossibly tall, looming figures – took her through brightly lit rooms, a garden always flooded with sunlight. She learned to sit up. The muscles in her back fanned out, pulsing as they grew. To distract her from the unending pain, clowns tumbled over the grass before her, chortling through their huge red lips, then popping out of existence in clouds of pixels.

She grew explosively, feeding all the time, a million impressions crowding into her soft sensorium.

There seemed to be no limit to the number of rooms in this place, this House. Slowly she began to understand that some of the rooms were Virtual chambers – blank screens against which any number of images could be projected. But even so, the House must comprise hundreds of rooms. And she – with her parents – wasn't alone here, she realized. There were other people, but at first they kept away, out of sight, apparent only by their actions: the meals they prepared, the toys they left her.

On the third day her parents took her on a trip by flitter. It was the first time she'd been away from the House, its grounds. She stared through the bulbous windows, pressing her nose to heated glass. The journey was an arc over a toylike landscape; a breast of blue ocean curved away from the land, all around her. This was the island of Skiros, her mother told her, and the sea was called the Aegean. The House was the largest construct on the island; it was a jumble of white, cube-shaped buildings, linked by corridors and surrounded by garden – grass, trees. Further out

there were bridges and roads looping through the air above the ground, houses like a child's bricks sprinkled across glowing hillsides.

Everything was drenched in heavy, liquid sunlight. The flitter snuggled at last against a grassy sward close to the shore of an ocean. Lieserl's mother lifted her out and placed her – on her stretching, unsteady legs – on the rough, sandy grass.

Hand in hand, the little family walked down a short slope to the beach.

The Sun burned through thinned air from an unbearably blue sky. Her vision seemed telescopic. She looked at distant groups of children and adults playing – far away, halfway to the horizon – and it was as if she was among them herself. Her feet, still uncertain, pressed into gritty, moist sand. She could taste the brine salt on the air; it seemed to permeate her very skin.

She found mussels clinging to a ruined pier. She prised them away with a toy spade, and gazed, fascinated, at their slime-dripping feet.

She sat on the sand with her parents, feeling her light costume stretch over her still-stretching limbs. They played a simple game, of counters moving over a floating Virtual board, pictures of ladders and hissing snakes. There was laughter, mock complaints by her father, elaborate pantomimes of cheating.

Her senses were electric. It was a wonderful day, full of light and joy, extraordinarily vivid sensations. Her parents loved her – she could see that in the way they walked with each other, came to her, played with her.

They must know she was different; but they didn't seem to care.

She didn't want to be different – to be wrong. She closed her mind against the thoughts, and concentrated on the snakes, the ladders, the sparkling counters.

Every morning she woke up in a bed that felt too small.

Lieserl liked the garden. She liked to watch the flowers straining their tiny, pretty faces towards the Sun, as the great light climbed patiently across the sky. The sunlight made the flowers grow, her father told her. Maybe she was like a flower, she thought, growing too quickly in all this sunlight.

On the fifth day she was taken to a wide, irregularly shaped, colourful classroom. This room was full of children – other children! – and toys, drawings, books. Sunlight flooded the room; perhaps there was some clear dome stretched over the open walls.

The children sat on the floor and played with paints and dolls, or talked earnestly to brilliantly-coloured Virtual figures – smiling birds, tiny clowns. The children turn to watch as she came in with her mother, their faces round and bright, like dapples of sunlight through leaves. She'd never been so close to other children before. Were these children different too?

One small girl scowled at her, and Lieserl quailed against her mother's legs. But her mother's familiar warm hands pressed into her back. "Go ahead. It's all right."

As she stared at the unknown girl's scowling face, Lieserl's questions, her too-adult, too-sophisticated doubts, seemed to evaporate. Suddenly, all that

mattered to her – all that mattered in the world – was that she should be accepted by these children – that they wouldn't know she was different.

An adult approached her: a man, young, thin, his features bland with youth. He wore a jumpsuit coloured a ludicrous orange; in the sunlight, the glow of it shone up over his chin. He smiled at her. "Lieserl, isn't it? My name's Michael. We're glad you're here." In a louder, exaggerated voice, he said, "Aren't we, people?"

He was answered by a rehearsed, chorused "Yes." "Now come and we'll find something for you to do," Michael said. He led her across the child-littered floor to a space beside a small boy. The boy – red-haired, with startling blue eyes – was staring at a Virtual puppet which endlessly formed and reformed: the figure two, collapsing into two snowflakes, two swans, two dancing children; the figure three, followed by three bears, three fish swimming in the air, three cakes. The boy mouthed the numbers, following the tinny voice of the Virtual. "Two. One. Two and one is three."

Michael introduced her to the boy – Tommy – and she sat down with him. Tommy, she was relieved to find, was so fascinated by his Virtual that he scarcely seemed aware that Lieserl was present – let alone different.

The number Virtual ran through its cycle and winked out of existence. "Bye bye, Tommy! Goodbye, Lieserl!"

Tommy was resting on his stomach, his chin cupped in his palms. Lieserl, awkwardly, copied his posture. Now Tommy turned to her – without appraisal, merely looking at her, with unconscious acceptance.

Lieserl said, "Can we see it again?"

He yawned and poked a finger into one nostril. "No. Let's see another. There's a great one about the pre-Cambrian explosion –"

"The what?"

He waved a hand dismissively. "You know, the Burgess Shale and all that. Wait till you see *Hallucigenia* crawling over your neck..."

The children played, and learned, and napped. Later, the girl who'd scowled at Lieserl – Ginie – started some trouble. She poked fun at the way Lieserl's bony wrists stuck out of her sleeves (Lieserl's growth rate was slowing, but she was still growing out of her clothes during a day). Then – unexpectedly, astonishingly – Ginie started to bawl, claiming that Lieserl had walked through her Virtual. When Michael came over Lieserl started to explain, calmly and rationally, that Ginie must be mistaken; but Michael told her not to cause such distress, and for punishment she was forced to sit away from the other children for ten minutes, without stimulation.

It was all desperately, savagely unfair. It was the longest ten minutes of Lieserl's life. She glowered at Ginie, filled with resentment.

The next day she found herself looking forward to going to the room with the children again. She set off with her mother through sunlit corridors. They reached the room Lieserl remembered – there was Michael, smiling a little wistfully to her, and Tommy, and the girl Ginie – but Ginie seemed different: childlike, unformed...

At least a head shorter than Lieserl.

Lieserl tried to recapture that delicious enmity of the day before, but it vanished even as she conjured it. Ginnie was just a kid.

She felt as if something had been stolen from her.

Her mother squeezed her hand. "Come on. Let's find a new room for you to play in."

Every day was unique. Every day Lieserl spent in a new place, with new people.

The world glowed with sunlight. Shining points trailed endlessly across the sky: low-orbit habitats and comet nuclei, tethered for power and fuel.

People walked through a sea of information, with access to the Virtual libraries available anywhere in the world at a subvocalized command. Lieserl learned quickly. She read about her parents. They were scientists, studying the Sun. They weren't alone; there were many people, huge resources, devoted to the Sun.

In the libraries there was a lot of material about the Sun, little of which she could follow. But she sensed some common threads.

Once, people had taken the Sun for granted. No longer. Now – for some reason – they feared it.

On the ninth day Lieserl studied herself in a Virtual holomirror. She had the image turn around, so she could see the shape of her skull, the lie of her hair. There was still some childish softness in her face, she thought, but the woman inside her was emerging already, as if her childhood was a receding tide. She would look like her mother – Phillida – in the strong-nosed set of her face, her large, vulnerable eyes; but she would have the sandy colouring of her father, George.

Lieserl looked about nine years old. But she was just nine days old.

She bade the Virtual break up; it shattered into a million tiny images of her face which drifted away like flies in the sunlit air.

Phillida and George were fine parents, she thought. They spent their time away from her working through technical papers – which scrolled through the air like falling leaves – and exploring elaborate, onion-ring Virtual models of stars. Although they were both clearly busy they gave themselves to her without hesitation. She moved in a happy world of smiles, sympathy and support.

Her parents loved her unreservedly. But that wasn't always enough.

She started to come up with more complicated, detailed questions. Like, what was the mechanism by which she was growing so rapidly? She didn't seem to eat more than the other children she encountered; what could be fuelling her absurd growth rates?

How did she know so much? She'd been born self-aware, with even the rudiments of language in her head. The Virtuals she interacted with in the classrooms were fun, and she always seemed to learn something new; but she absorbed no more than scraps of knowledge through them compared to the feast of insight with which she awoke each morning.

What had taught her, in the womb? What was teaching her now?

She had no answers. But perhaps – somehow – it

was all connected with this strange, global obsession with the Sun. She remembered her childish fantasy – that she might be like a flower, straining up too quickly to the Sun. Maybe, she wondered now, there was some grain of truth in that insight.

The strange little family had worked up some simple, homely rituals together. Lieserl's favourite was the game, each evening, of snakes and ladders. George brought home an old set – a real board made of card, and wooden counters. Already Lieserl was too old for the game; but she loved the company of her parents, her father's elaborate jokes, the simple challenge of the game, the feel of the worn, antique counters.

Phillida showed her how to use Virtuals to produce her own game boards. Her first efforts, on her eleventh day, were plain, neat forms, little more than copies of the commercial boards she'd seen. But she soon began to experiment. She drew a huge board of a million squares, which covered a whole room – she could walk through the board, a planar sheet of light at about waist height. She crammed the board with intricate, curling snakes, vast ladders, vibrantly glowing squares – detail piled on detail.

The next morning she walked with eagerness to the room where she'd built her board – and was immediately disappointed. Her efforts seemed pale, static, derivative – obviously the work of a child, despite the assistance of the Virtual software.

She wiped the board clean, leaving a grid of pale squares floating in the air. Then she started to populate it again – but this time with animated half-human snakes, slithering "ladders" of a hundred forms. She'd learned to access the Virtual libraries, and she plundered the art and history of a hundred centuries to populate her board.

Of course it was no longer possible to play games on the board, but that didn't matter. The board was the thing, a little world in itself. She withdrew a little from her parents, spending long hours in deep searches through the libraries. She gave up her classes. Her parents didn't seem to mind; they came to speak to her regularly, and showed an interest in her projects, and respected her privacy.

The board kept her interest the next day. But now she evolved elaborate games, dividing the board into countries and empires with arbitrary bands of glowing light. Armies of ladder-folk joined with legions of snakes in crude reproductions of the great events of human history.

She watched the symbols flicker across the Virtual board, shimmering, coalescing; she dictated lengthy chronicles of the histories of her imaginary countries.

By the end of the day, though, she was starting to grow more interested in the history texts she was plundering than in her own elaborations on them. She went to bed, eager for the next morning to come.

She awoke in darkness, doubled in agony.

She called for light, which flooded the room, sourceless. She sat up in bed.

Blood spotted the sheets. She screamed.

Phillida sat with her, cradling her head. Lieserl pressed herself against her mother's warmth, trying to still her trembling.

"I think it's time you asked me your questions."

Lieserl sniffed. "What questions?"

"The ones you've carried around with you since the moment you were born." Phillida smiled. "I could see it in your eyes, even at the moment. You poor thing... to be burdened with so much awareness. I'm sorry, Lieserl."

Lieserl pulled away. Suddenly she felt cold, vulnerable.

"Tell me why you're sorry," she said at last.

"You're my daughter." Phillida placed her hands on Lieserl's shoulders and pushed her face close; Lieserl could feel the warmth of her breath, and the soft room light caught the grey in her mother's blonde hair, making it seem to shine. "Never forget that. You're as human as I am. But —" She hesitated.

"But what?"

"But you're being — engineered."

Nanobots swarmed through Lieserl's body, Phillida said. They plated calcium over her bones, stimulated the generation of new cells, force-growing her body like some absurd sunflower — they even implanted memories, artificial learning, directly into her cortex.

Lieserl felt like scraping at her skin, gouging out this artificial infection. "Why? Why did you let this be done to me?"

Phillida pulled her close, but Lieserl stayed stiff, resisting mutely. Phillida buried her face in Lieserl's hair; Lieserl felt the soft weight of her mother's cheek on the crown of her head. "Not yet," Phillida said. "Not yet. A few more days, my love. That's all..."

Phillida's cheeks grew warmer, as if she was crying, silently, into her daughter's hair.

**L**ieserl returned to her snakes and ladders board. She found herself looking on her creation with affection, but also nostalgic sadness; she felt distant from this elaborate, slightly obsessive concoction.

Already she'd outgrown it.

She walked into the middle of the sparkling board and bade the Sun, a foot wide, rise out from the centre of her body. Light swamped the board, shattering it.

She was the only adolescent who had constructed fantasy worlds like this. She read about the Brontës, in their lonely parsonage in the north of England, and their elaborate shared world of kings and princes and empires. And she read about the history of the humble game of snakes and ladders. The game had come from India, where it was a morality teaching aid called *Moksha-Patamu*. There were twelve vices and four virtues, and the objective was to get to Nirvana. It was easier to fail than to succeed... The British in the 19th century had adopted it as an instructional guide for children called *Kismet*; Lieserl stared at images of claustrophobic boards, forbidding snakes. Thirteen snakes and eight ladders showed children that if they were good and obedient their life would be rewarded.

But by a few decades later the game had lost its moral subtexts. Lieserl found images from the early 20th century of a sad-looking little clown; he slithered haplessly down snakes and heroically clambered up ladders. Lieserl stared at him, trying to understand the appeal of his baggy trousers, walking cane and little moustache.

The game, with its charm and simplicity, had

survived through the 20 centuries which had worn away since the death of that forgotten clown.

She grew interested in the numbers embedded in the various versions of the game. The twelve-to-four ratio of *Moksha-Patamu* clearly made it a harder game to win than *Kismet*'s thirteen-to-eight — but how much harder?

She began to draw new boards in the air. But these boards were abstractions — clean, colourless, little more than sketches. She ran through high-speed simulated games, studying their outcomes. She experimented with ratios of snakes to ladders, with their placement. Phillida sat with her and introduced her to combinatorial mathematics, the theory of games — to different forms of wonder.

On her 15th day she tired of her own company and started to attend classes again. She found the perceptions of others a refreshing counterpoint to her own high-speed learning.

The world seemed to open up around her like a flower; it was a world full of sunlight, of endless avenues of information, of stimulating people.

She read up on nanobots.

Body cells were programmed to commit suicide. A cell itself manufactured enzymes which cut its DNA into neat pieces, and quietly closed down. The suicide of cells was a guard against uncontrolled growth — tumours — and a tool to sculpt the developing body: in the womb, the withering of unwanted cells carved fingers and toes from blunt tissue buds.

Death was the default of a cell. Chemical signals were sent by the body, to instruct cells to remain alive.

The nanotechnological manipulation of this process made immortality simple. It also made the manufacture of a Lieserl simple.

Lieserl studied this, scratching absently at her inhabited, engineered arms. She still didn't know why.

With a boy called Matthew, from her class, she took a trip away from the House — without her parents for the first time. They rode a flitter to the shore where she'd played as a child, twelve days earlier. She found the broken pier where she'd discovered mussels. The place seemed less vivid — less magical — and she felt a sad nostalgia for the loss of the freshness of her childhood senses.

But there were other compensations. Her body was strong, lithe, and the sunlight was like warm oil on her skin. She ran and swam, relishing the sparkle of the ozone-laden air in her lungs. She and Matthew mock-wrestled and chased in the surf, clambering over each other like young apes — like children, she thought, but not quite with complete innocence...

As sunset approached they allowed the flitter to return them to the House. They agreed to meet the next day, perhaps take another trip somewhere. Matthew kissed her lightly, on the lips, as they parted.

That night she could barely sleep. She lay in the dark of her room, the scent of salt still strong in her nostrils, the image of Matthew alive in her mind. Her body seemed to pulse with hot blood, with its endless, continuing growth.

The next day — her 16th — Lieserl rose quickly. She'd never felt so alive; her skin still glowed from the salt and sunlight of the shore, and there was a hot tension inside her, an ache deep in her belly, a tightness.

When she reached the flitter bay at the front of the House, Matthew was waiting for her. His back was turned, the low sunlight causing the fine hairs at the base of his neck to glow.

He turned to face her.

He reached out to her, uncertainly, then allowed his hands to drop to his sides. He didn't seem to know what to say; his posture changed, subtly, his shoulders slumping slightly; before her eyes he was becoming shy of her.

She was taller than him. Visibly older. She became abruptly aware of the still-childlike roundness of his face, the awkwardness of his manner. The thought of touching him – the memory of her feverish dreams during the night – seemed absurd, impossibly adolescent.

She felt the muscles in her neck tighten; she felt as if she must scream. Matthew seemed to recede from her, as if she was viewing him through a tunnel.

Once again the labouring nanobots – the damned, unceasing nanotechnological infection of her body – had taken away part of her life.

This time, though, it was too much to bear.

**“W**hy? Why?” She wanted to scream abuse at her mother – to hurt her.

Phyllida had never looked so old. Her skin seemed drawn tight across the bones of her face, the lines etched deep. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Believe me. When we – George and I – volunteered for this programme, we knew it would be painful. But we never dreamed how much. Neither of us had children before. Perhaps if we had, we’d have been able to anticipate how this would feel.”

“I’m a freak – an absurd experiment,” Lieserl shouted. “A construct. Why did you make me human? Why not some insentient animal? Why not a Virtual?”

“Oh, you had to be human. As human as possible...” Phyllida seemed to come to a decision. “I’d hoped to give you a few more days of – life, normality – before it had to end. You seemed to be finding some happiness –”

“In fragments,” Lieserl said bitterly. “This is no life, Phyllida. It’s grotesque.”

“I know. I’m sorry, my love. Come with me.”

“Where?”

“Outside. To the garden. I want to show you something.”

Suspicious, hostile, Lieserl allowed her mother to take her hand; but she made her fingers lie lifeless, cold in Phyllida’s warm grasp.

It was mid-morning now. The Sun’s light flooded the garden; flowers – white and yellow – strained up towards the sky.

Lieserl looked around; the garden was empty. “What am I supposed to be seeing?”

Phyllida, solemnly, pointed upwards.

Lieserl tilted back her head, shading her eyes to block out the light. The sky was a searing-blue dome, marked only by a high vapour trail and the lights of habitats.

“No.” Gently, Phyllida pulled Lieserl’s hand down from her face, and, cupping her chin, tipped her face flower-like towards the Sun.

The star’s light seemed to fill her head. Dazzled,

she dropped her eyes, stared at Phyllida through a haze of blurred, streaked retinal images.

The Sun. Of course...

**T**he capcom said, Domn it, Lieserl, you’re going to have to respond properly. Things are difficult enough without –

“I know. I’m sorry. How are you feeling, anyway?”

Me? I’m fine. But that’s hardly the point, is it? Now come on, Lieserl, the team here are getting on my back; let’s run through the tests.

“You mean I’m not down here to enjoy myself?”

The capcom, in his safe habitat far beyond the protosphere, didn’t respond.

“Yeah. The tests. Okay, electromagnetic first.” She adjusted her sensorium. “I’m plunged into darkness,” she said drily. “There’s very little free radiation at any frequency – perhaps an X-ray glow from the protosphere; it looks a little like a late evening sky. And –”

We know the systems are functioning. I need to know what you see, what you feel.

“What I feel?”

She spread her arms and sailed backwards through the “air” of the cavern. The huge convective cells buffeted and merged like living things, whales in this insubstantial sea of gas.

“I see convection fountains,” she said. “A cave full of them.”

She rolled over onto her belly, so that she was gliding face-down, surveying the plasma sea below her. She opened her eyes, changing her mode of perception. The convective honeycomb faded into the background of her senses, and the magnetic flux tubes came into prominence, solidifying out of the air; beyond them the convective pattern was a sketchy framework, overlaid. The tubes were each a hundred yards broad, channels cutting through the air; they were thousands of miles long, and they filled the air around her, all the way down to the plasma sea.

Lieserl dipped into a tube; she felt the tingle of enhanced magnetic strength. Its walls rushed past her, curving gracefully. “It’s wonderful,” she said. “I’m inside a flux tube. It’s an immense tunnel; it’s like a fairground ride. I could follow this path all the way round the Sun.”

Maybe. I don’t know if we need the poetry, Lieserl. The capcom hesitated, and when he spoke again he sounded severely encouraging, as if he’d been instructed to be nice to her. We’re glad you’re feeling – oh – happy in yourself, Lieserl.

“My new self. Maybe. Well, it was an improvement on the old; you have to admit that.”

Yes. I want you to think back to the downloading. Can you do that?

“The downloading? Why?”

Come on, Lieserl. It’s another test, obviously.

“A test of what?”

Your trace functions. We want to know if –

“My trace functions. You mean my memory.”

...Yes. He had the grace to sound embarrassed. Think back, Lieserl. Can you remember?

Downloading...

**I**t was her 90th day, her 90th physical-year. She was impossibly frail – unable even to walk, or feed herself, or clean herself.

They'd taken her to a habitat close to the Sun. They'd almost left the download too late; they'd had one scare when an infection had somehow got through to her and settled into her lungs, nearly killing her.

She wanted to die.

Physically she was the oldest human in the System. She felt as if she were underwater: she could barely feel, or taste, or see anything, as if she was encased in some deadening, viscous fluid. And she knew her mind was failing.

It was so fast she could feel it. It was like a ghastly reverse run of her accelerated childhood. She woke every day to a new diminution of her self. She had come to dread sleep, yet could not avoid it.

She couldn't bear the indignity of it. Everybody else was immortal, and young; and the technology which had made them so was being used to kill Lieserl. She hated those who had put her in this position.

Her mother visited her for the last time, a few days before the download. Lieserl, through her ruined, rheumy old eyes, was barely able to recognize Philida – this young, weeping woman, only a few months older than when she had held up her baby girl to the Sun.

Lieserl cursed her, sent her away.

At last she was taken, in her bed, to a downloading chamber at the heart of the habitat.

Do you remember, Lieserl? Was it – continuous?

"...No."

It was a sensory explosion.

In an instant she was young again, with every sense alive and vivid. Her vision was sharp, her hearing impossibly precise. And slowly, slowly, she had become aware of new senses – senses beyond the human. She could see the dull infra-red glow of the bellies and heads of the people working around the shell of her own abandoned body, the sparkle of X-ray photons from the Solar protosphere as they leaked through the habitat's shielding.

She'd retained her human memories, but they were qualitatively different from the experiences she was accumulating now. Limited, partial, subjective, imperfectly recorded: like fading paintings, she thought.

... Except, perhaps, for that single, golden day at the beach.

She studied the husk of her body. It was almost visibly imploding now, empty...

"I remember," she told the capcom. "Yes, I remember."

**N**ow the flux tube curved away to the right; and, in following it, she became aware that she was tracing out a spiral path. She let herself relax into the motion, and watched the cave-world beyond the tube wheel around her. The flux tubes neighbouring her own had become twisted into spirals too, she realized; she was following one strand in a rope of twisted-together flux tubes.

Lieserl, what's happening? We can see your trajectory's altering, fast.

"I'm fine. I've got myself into a flux rope, that's all..."

Lieserl, you should get out of there...

She let the tube sweep her around. "Why? This is fun."

Maybe. But it isn't a good idea for you to break the surface; we're concerned about the stability of the wormhole –

Lieserl sighed and let herself slow. "Oh, damn it, you're just no fun. I would have enjoyed bursting out through the middle of a sunspot. What a great way to go."

We're not done with the tests yet, Lieserl.

"What do you want me to do?"

One more...

"Just tell me."

Run a full self-check, Lieserl. Just for a few minutes... Drop the Virtual constructs.

She hesitated. "Why? The systems are obviously functioning to specification."

Lieserl, you don't need to make this difficult for me. The capcom sounded defensive. This is a standard suite of tests for any AI which –

"All right, damn it."

She closed her eyes, and with a sudden, impulsive, stab of will, let her Virtual image of herself – the illusion of a human body around her – crumble.

**I**t was like waking from a dream: a soft comfortable dream of childhood, waking to find herself entombed in a machine, a crude construct of bolts and cords and gears.

She considered herself.

The tetrahedral Interface of the wormhole was suspended in the body of the Sun. The thin, searing-hot gas of the convective zone poured into its four triangular faces, so that the Interface was surrounded by a sculpture of inflowing gas, a flower carved dynamically from the Sun's flesh, almost obscuring the Interface itself. The solar material was, she knew, being pumped through the wormhole to the second Interface in orbit around the Sun; convection zone gases emerged, blazing, from the drifting tetrahedron, making it into a second, miniature Sun around which human habitats could cluster.

By pumping away the gas, and the heat it carried, the Interface refrigerated itself, enabling it to survive – with its precious, fragile cargo of data stores...

The stores which sustained the awareness of herself, Lieserl.

She inspected herself, at many levels, simultaneously.

At the physical level she studied crisp matrices of data, shifting, coalescing. And overlaid on that was the logical structure of data storage and access paths which represented the components of her mind.

Good... Good, Lieserl. You're sending us good data. How are you feeling?

"You keep asking me that, damn it. I feel –"

Enhanced...

No longer trapped in a single point, in a box of bone behind eyes made of jelly.

What made her conscious? It was the ability to be aware of what was happening in her mind, and in the world around her, and what had happened in the past.

By any test, she was more conscious than any other human – because she had more of the machinery of consciousness. She was supremely conscious – the most conscious human who had ever lived.

If, she thought uneasily, she was still human.

Good. Good. All right, Lieserl. We have work to do.  
She let her awareness implode, once more, into a Virtual-human form. Her perception was immediately simplified. To be seeing through apparently-human eyes was comforting...and yet, she thought, restrictive.

Perhaps it wouldn't be much longer before she felt ready to abandon even this last vestige of humanity. And then what?

Lieserl?

"I hear you."

She turned her face towards the core.

"**T**here is a purpose, Lieserl," her mother said. "A justification. You aren't simply an experiment. You have a mission." She waved her hand at the sprawling, friendly buildings that comprised the House. "Most of the people here, particularly the children, don't know anything about you. They have jobs, goals – lives of their own to follow. But they're here for you."

"Lieserl, your experiences have been designed – George and I were selected, even – to ensure that the first few days of your existence would imprint you with humanity."

"The first few days?" Suddenly the unknowable future was like a black wall, looming towards her; she felt as out of control of her life as if she was a counter on some immense, invisible snakes-and-ladders board.

"I don't want this. I want to be me. I want my freedom, Phillida."

"No, Lieserl. You're not free, I'm afraid; you never can be. You have a goal."

"What goal?"

"Listen to me. The Sun gave us life. Without it – without the other stars – we couldn't survive."

"We're a strong species. We believe we can live as long as the stars – for tens of billions of years. And perhaps even beyond that. But we've had – glimpses – of the future, the far distant future...Disturbing glimpses. People are starting to plan for that future – to work on projects which will take millions of years to come to fruition..."

"Lieserl, you're one of those projects."

"I don't understand."

Phillida took her hand, squeezed it gently; the simple human contact seemed incongruous, the garden around them transient, a chimera, before this talk of megayears and the future of the species.

"Lieserl, something is wrong with the Sun. You have to find out what. The Sun is dying; something – or someone – is killing it."

Phillida's eyes were huge before her, staring, probing for understanding. "Don't be afraid. My dear, you will live forever. If you want to. You are a new form of human. And you will see wonders of which I – and everyone else who has ever lived – can only dream."

Lieserl listened to her tone, coldly, analysing it. "But you don't envy me. Do you, Phillida?"

Phillida's smile crumbled. "No," she said quietly.

Lieserl tipped back her head. An immense light flooded her eyes.

She cried out.

Her mother enfolded her in her arms. "The Sun, Lieserl. The Sun..."

Stephen Baxter's latest novel is the 19th-century sf extravaganza, or "scientific romance," *Anti-Ice*. He last appeared in *Interzone* with "Downstream" (issue 75), and has been one of our most prolific contributors over the past five or six years. Just the other weekend, he was due to be guest of honour at Novacon, the British sf convention held every November in Birmingham.

All back issues of *Interzone* (apart from numbers 1, 5, 6, 7, 17, 20, 21, 22 and 23) are still available at £2.50 each (£2.80 or \$5 overseas) from the address on page 3 – as are the 14 back issues of *MILLION: The Magazine about Popular Fiction*.

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# Mutant Popcorn

## Nick Lowe

I don't think anyone could claim that the contribution of continental Europe to sf cinema has been a proud one. Between the lonely pinnacles of *La Jetée* and *Delicatessen*, probably the nearest the EC has ever got to a credible native sf-movie tradition was the string of Mad Massimo spaghetti-survivalist quickies that tumbled out of Italy in the golden early days of video. The strengths of European fantasy cinema have always tended to concentrate in the less technologically-driven horror genres, because the obstacles to anything else are simply so daunting: there's rarely the budget to rival the production values of Hollywood effects movies, there's little in the way of distinctively homegrown sf tradition to draw on, and above all the post-millennial world is by now so identified with the Pacific powers that the very premise of any future's existing on the wrong side of the Atlantic has to vault a near-impossible credibility barrier.

And yet here, against odds, is Alex de la Iglesia's enthusiastic and erratically pleasing début *Accion Mutante*, an unabashedly European interplanetary splatter farce clawing its way to international release on the coat-tails of a lucky if tenuous association with one of the only two Spanish filmmakers in history that anyone's ever heard of. (The "Produced by Almodóvar" boast on the posters is a masterpiece of creative disingenuousness: the Almodóvar in question is the mighty Pedro's considerably less famous brother, and his "producing" job limited to one of those name-on-the-picture executive production credits, a bit like proclaiming "the director once had a beer with Frank BUNUEL.") One has to hand it, but what does it say about the clan's real feelings for the film that Pedro wouldn't even take an xprod? And while by intercontinental standards it has to be judged at best a partial win, there's no doubt that what makes its best moments seem as fresh and weird as they do is its injection into a fairly routine sf caper of a distinctive and remarkably uncompromised Latin sensibility that mutates its silly material into something at times quite

engagingly alien. Much is just surface glitter – the taste-free disability humour, the Castilian covers of 60s bubblegum hits on the soundtrack, the occasional resoundingly unProtestant line like "My daughter died when a terrorist violated her innocence." But it's most interesting where it openly subverts the Hollywood norms of what sf cinema itself should be.

For one thing, it's unapologetically Marxist – not, of course, in any sense that implies particular didactic ambition or political sophistication, but in the cheap'n'cheerful tradition of spaghetti Marxism that instinctively informs the narratives of conflict in southern European popular cinema since the sixties, and which here expresses itself in a number of ways that would be way out of bounds in a Hollywood product of the same era. Most glaringly, *Accion Mutante* takes it perfectly for granted that the class struggle will be an obvious and ongoing thing in the future (and a fortiori is ongoing and obvious in the present): even in 2012, a full twenty years into the posthistorical world, there will still be a spoiled and insulated over-class measuring its days by a circuit of glitzy society weddings, and a grimy dispossessed proletariat still trying to sneak in the back to let off bombs. And with this goes the more provocative recognition that terrorism, however comedically incompetent and misled, is motivated by intelligible political causes rather than the simple love of evil, extortion of capital, ideological brainwashing by eastern powers who dispute the divinity of Christ, or a lemming compulsion to be taken out by stars with no shirt and a captured automatic weapon. In states where guerrilla violence against civilians by marginalized political groups has defied the currents of cool to live on past the seventies, this doesn't strike us as a terribly staggering conceptual challenge; but it's central to the Hollywood agenda to deny even its thinkability. The two principal gag twists in *Accion Mutante* are that (i) all the crippled comrades who've been encouraged to develop a polemical pride in

their disability by reclassifying themselves as "mutants" are after all the dupes of their treacherous mastermind hefe, who despite all rhetoric is only after the money, and (ii) the society bride they kidnap is transformed by a blow on the head – "Not the Stockholm syndrome again" – from pampered *Hello!* virgin to guntoting metal moll. In Hollywood, there wouldn't even be room for a joke in there.

The other strikingly Latin thing about *Accion Mutante*'s take on sf is its quite jaw-loosening sloppiness over basic genre credibilities. Not only are we bombarded with the kind of astounding junk dialogue that in the Anglophone world died out with *Blake's Seven* ("thirty megon fractions ago," "Keep this course until wave motion force G-7," and so forth), but the whole scenario rests on an egregious cocktail of technological and futurological nonsense that would be startling even in the most amateurish retail-premiere potboiler. Okay, brake fluid in a spaceship could charitably be viewed as a deliberate absurdity, and non-identical Siamese twins can claim at least one major-league literary precedent; but the brain really does start to spin out of control when the location shifts in mid-film to the Lost Mine on Planet Axturias. The year, remember, is 2012 – which gives us just nineteen years to discover "Planet Axturias," establish its habitability, pioneer interplanetary flight and develop it to the point where it becomes routine, land on what is presumably (if presumptions mean anything here) is an extrasolar world, found settlements, organize the exploitation of its resources, and leave enough time over for the whole thing to degenerate into semi-anarchy.

Only in European comics would such insouciant twaddle thrive; and sure enough de la Iglesia, who is careful to represent himself as a stylishly postliterate ingenu, acknowledges the pre-eminence of comics in his canon of influence. It's doubtless the higher profile of comics in the European sf imagination that's given *Accion Mutante* its rather uneasy streak of gleeful cartoon sadism: the stapled



lips, the comedy torture scene, the pervasive splatter humour that makes *Braindead* look mature and amusing. Unfortunately, a lot of things that must have seemed quite fresh and funny within that tradition look awfully tired and clichéd to the world outside: the zany future fashions, the hilariously big guns and massacre frolics, the witty citation of the *Mission Impossible* theme, the throwaway situationist humour of the Verhoevenesque media gags ("every breakfast is a trip with Trips illustrated acid flakes" has lost nothing in the subtitled). Most of this would have been easier to pass in a better-paced and more inventive plot, that didn't feel obliged to waste a member of the gang every five minutes so as to leave only one and a half survivors by the midpoint, and which didn't run fatally out of both momentum and, from the look of it, budget the moment it makes planetfall and has to blow up its evidently much-loved spaceship set. The London hack posse laughed like drains for the first few minutes, then subsided into grim protracted silence. It would be a shame if that were its maker's fate as well.

The one American film allowed by de la Iglesia as an influence is, rather hubristically, David Lynch's *Eraserhead*, lately back on release in one of those buy-it-soon-on-video remix editions (and due on tv, I think,

around the time you read this). To call this a new cut is straining things, as the only thing rejigged in this director's mix is the famous sound, and while the new edition certainly does sound fabulous I'd defy anyone to pin down any substantial differences from the beloved old vinyl version. There are certainly awkwardnesses about the original narrative editing that the Lynch of today would never fall into – moments of such wilfully skewed continuity that attention simply stumbles but plainly an actual recut would have been unthinkable and probably impossible. And yet, without a frame's difference from the 1977 version, this has become a far more changed film than any of the conventional crop of director's cuts and special editions. It's not merely that most people's formative experience of this film tends to have been at late-night shows where they were half-awake, drunk, and bursting, and keen for the undeniable pleasures of watching to be over as early as possible. (It'll all come back; you'll see.) The real transformation, of course, comes from our intimacy with the later Lynch, and with the easily recognized elements of recurrent obsession and inner biography that conspire to mutate what was once the absolute paradigm of cinematic strangeness into something now rather familiar and accessible. It's become a different work, in the way that first films always

do; the oeuvre gives you points of reference, things to look for, patterns of meaning that soften the sense of estrangement. And while it's invidious and pointless to play the game of cataloguing the premonitions of motifs and images from the later corpus (there are an awful lot), it's simply not possible to watch *Eraserhead* now without an accompanying geigercount of little clicks of recognition, or to set aside the by now generous documentation of the film's personal roots in the early career of the author of *Boxing Helena*.

Yet what's impressive is how amazingly little the film is diminished by all this, and how stoutly both its vision and its technique stand up to the inevitable ruthless scrutiny for the infirmities of juvenilia. You keep expecting the seams to show, the baby to look a bit more mechanical than you remember, the sets to look cheaper, the shocks to seem weaker. But they really don't. Instead, you simply tune in to appreciate finer and closer details of nuance and backdrop, and the sheer craftsmanship of sound and image that makes it easy to see exactly how it needed seven years to make. There are longueurs, for sure, but even these become part of the texture of nightmare – so that the failure of scenes to end where they should adds to the general sense of being trapped in unbearable situations past any hope of escape. There's certainly some pretty

strange acting, and a few things like the eraserhead sequence itself that simply have to go down as misfires; yet what remains proudly intact is the unrivalled evocation and surrealization of the everyday horror of being stuck in miserable poverty, in the wrong place, the wrong relationships, and the wrong life, with even the surfaces of familiar things a veil for still more incomprehensible worlds within. When all this is said, it's still a bit of an ordeal, you do spend most of the time waiting for it to be over, and on the whole you're jolly glad when it is. But the climactic sequence remains one of the finest moments in movie horror, especially if it's been long enough that you've forgotten exactly how it runs; it's quite the most truthful film ever made about parenthood; and for 16 years it's stayed the debut to beat. Between now and 2009, young Alex is going to have his work cut out.

(Nick Lowe)

## Interaction

Continued from page 5

copy in order to pencil in Leon Stover's correction, but as the book has no index I could not immediately retrace *The Man Who Could Work Miracles*. There are almost certainly further slips of this order – no complex book is without them – and I imagine Professor Philmus might be glad to be informed of any. I can tell him, for instance, that he's wrong when he says Maurice Renard's *Le Docteur Lerne*, *Sous-Dieu* (1908) "has yet to be translated into English" (p.216). An English translation appeared in the States in 1923 from The Macaulay Company as *New Bodies for Old*; it is mentioned in sf bibliographies by Barron, Bleiler, Clareson, Curry, Locke, and others.

John Clute

London

And Eric Korn adds:

Professor Philmus is kind enough to acknowledge my cooperation. Would that he had asked for more from me – or from any moderately competent collector, bookdealer, or bibliographer – before his unfortunate confusion of the Press of the University of Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, England, Great Britain, with the similarly-named establishment in the suburbs of Boston, Massachusetts, USA.

It is a mistake, I feel, that fatally undermines his choice of copy-text, betrays a curious insensitivity to linguistic texture, and casts doubt on the authority of his judgment. I sympathize with his chagrin that a reviewer should concentrate on this, ignoring the rest of his considerable labours; but you don't hear a lot of praise for the décor of the staterooms of the Titanic.

Eric Korn

London

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**WHERE SCIENCE FICTION MEETS REALITY**

# Ansible Link

## David Langford



The 1993 World SF Convention was held this year in San Francisco, and (as always) built with dreadful inevitability to the presentation of the Hugo awards. Best Novel was a tie: Vernor Vinge's *A Fire Upon the Deep* and Connie Willis's *Doomsday Book*. ("Amazing," said a British bookdealer. "I suppose I'll have to order extra copies of them. I'm astonished *Red Mars* didn't win.") Me: "You thought that was the best book?" He: "Well, I haven't actually read it. As such.") Novella: Lucius Shepherd, *Barnacle Bill the Spacer*. Novelette: Janet Kagan, "The Nutcracker Coup." Short: Connie Willis, "Even the Queen." Nonfiction: *A Wealth of Fable*, Harry Warner's revised history of 1950s sf fandom. Dramatic: *The Inner Light*, a *Star Trek: TNG* episode. Editor: Gardner Dozois of *Asimov's*. Artist: Don Maitz. Original artwork: James Gurney, *Dinotopia*. Semiprozine: Andy Porter's *Science Fiction Chronicle* (stunner of the weekend – this is the category where the rival sf newspaper *Locus* "always" wins). Fanzine: *Mimoso*. Fan writer: me (fervent thanks to voters – your cheques are in the mail). Fan artist: Peggy Ranson. John W. Campbell award for best new writer: Laura Resnick.

### The Cosmic Cocktail Party

John Clute jubilates (after awesome contractual delays at Little, Brown): "I and John Grant [Paul Barnett] have agreed with Orbit to do an *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* for Spring 1995 publication. It will cross-refer to the *SF Encyclopedia* and will have a similar setting and format, but entry structure and the balance between theme and author entries will differ. Contributing editors will be Roz Kaveney, David Langford and Brian Stableford."

David Garnett heard from Gollancz that "New Worlds 3 will be out between October and November." But there isn't anything between October and November, so maybe they're trying to tell me something." He adds that *NW4* is complete apart from the really hord bits – the introduction and biographies.

John Grant, proofreading the tenth novel in his (and Joe Dever's) "Lone Wolf" fantasy saga, found to his delight that "We thought you were a mercenary bursting in here in search of plunder" had been hugely improved to: "We thought you were a mercenary bursting in here in search of a plumber."

William James's *Before the Sun Falls*

is to be published on schedule by Orbit after all, despite wicked gossip noted last issue. A pundit remarks: "It's going to be fun reading the reviews, isn't it?"

Harry Adam Knight held a launch party for his reissued dinosaur novel (*Gollancz*, September). "A long, long time ago – long before Jurassic Park – there was CARNOSAUR... During the party there will be a video screening of Roger Corman's film version of *Carnosaur*. Attendees are permitted to shout abuse at the screen."

Terry Pratchett is at it again, completing what is apparently the first "Discworld" rock'n'roll novel. "My hero cwyms from Llamados, knywn for singing, sheep and stone circles..."

Chris Reed of *Bock Brain Recluse* boasts smugly of his win under "Magazines – Fiction" in the 1993 US Readercon Small Press Awards. (Novel winner: More Thon Melchisedech, R.A. Lafferty. Collection: *Globolhead*, Bruce Sterling. Nonfiction magazine: *SF Eye*.)

Bob Shaw, after publishing *How To Write Science Fiction* with Allison & Busby, has become the editorial consultant for A&B's new sf list. "It feels a bit funny sitting on the other side of the editorial fence, and already I have been subjected to the cliché which replaced Adam and Eve stepping out of a space-ship – the life-or-death space battle which turns out to have been a video game."

### Infinitely Improbable

**Another Crossover Issue.** Court action against *Vogue Interzone*, the ersatz *Vogue* produced by artist Christof Kolhofer, prompted *Interzone's* David Pringle to issue a reflexive statement about the merger. "Neither *Vogue* nor *Interzone* subscribers will be disappointed – all the familiar features will be preserved, including Brian Stableford's 'Yesterday's Bestselling Cosmetics' series, Nick Lowe's guide to footwear with street-cred and John Clute's in-depth fashion analyses..."

**Intersection.** The 1995 World SF Convention to be held in Glasgow (and thus always referred to in hushed, superstitious tones as "The Scottish Convention"), has a new address: Intersection, Admail 336, Glasgow, G2 1BR. Registration now costs £60. (The 1996 venue, voted on this year, will be Los Angeles.)

**Amulatory Phlegm!** This is but one

of many fascinating terms applied by nice Harlan Ellison to absent Andrew Porter during an hour-long interview on US cable tv, possibly mystifying viewers. Practised Ellison-watchers infer that relations between HE ("Andy Porter!?! That suppurating bag of monkey nuts...loathsome, detestable...ennobled by the word 'turd'...monster...") and AP ("Harlan Ellison burns bridges before he crosses them.") may be less than wholly cordial.

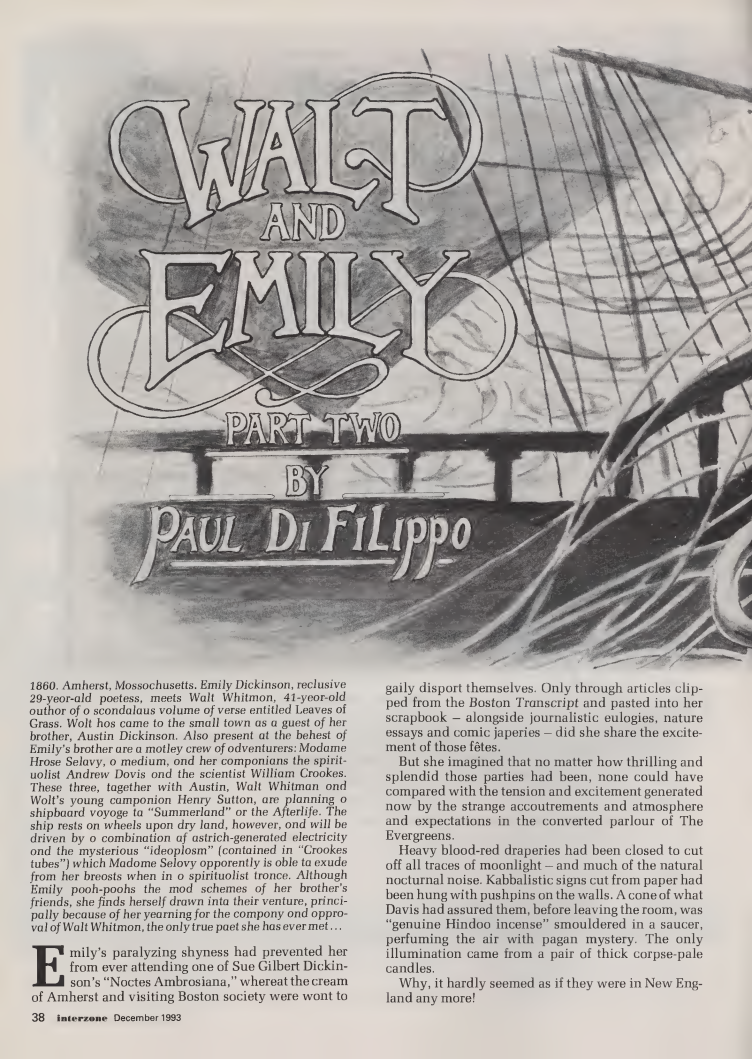
**"Science Fact, Not Science Fiction"** ...says the deeply authoritative W.H. Smith Bookcase of Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars*. So that's why it keeps not quite winning major sf awards.

**I Have Seen the Future and It Coughs.** FOREST (Freedom Organization for the Right to Enjoy Smoking Tobacco) is running an sf/fantasy/horror story competition. The theme is "Health and Freedom" but "not propaganda." £100 first prize; not more than 3 entries of up to 2,500 words per person; you must be over 18 by the 16 January 1994 deadline. Forest Story Competition, 2 Grosvenor Gardens, London, SW1W 0DH. Judges include George Hay. The flyer asks terrifyingly: "Will smoking (and other private pleasures) be illegal in the future?" This column supports smoking as a private pleasure to be practised as freely as defecation, sex or singing in the bath.

**More Awards.** Campbell Memorial Award (novel): Charles Sheffield, *Brother to Dragons*. Sturgeon Memorial Award (short fiction): Dan Simmons, "This Year's Class Picture."

**The Glamour** is a novel with a famously shifty text: its hardback and paperback had different endings, and this tradition continued when its BBC Radio 4 play version was rebroadcast in September. The first airing had been fuzzy (re-recorded to speed it by 1 second/minute and cure a 90-second over-run, but on a duff machine); this time, author Christopher Priest personally cut a scene...

**Deep Waters.** A Millennium press release plugs spinoff novels (by Diane Duane and Peter Morwood) from a new Spielberg TV series about a super submarine called *seaQuest* [sic]. An editor bumbles: "The special effects, settings and technology will be absolutely extraordinary"...gosh, I can hardly wait to open these hi-tech books. Early review by G'rry And'rson: "There's never been such an original idea as *Voyage to the Bottom of the seaQuest*, I mean stingQuest!"



# WALT AND EMILY

## PART TWO

BY  
PAUL Di FILIPPO

1860. Amherst, Massachusetts. Emily Dickinson, reclusive 29-year-old poetess, meets Walt Whitman, 41-year-old author of a scandalous volume of verse entitled *Leaves of Grass*. Walt has come to the small town as a guest of her brother, Austin Dickinson. Also present at the behest of Emily's brother are a motley crew of adventurers: Madame Hrose Selavy, a medium, and her companions the spirit-uolist Andrew Davis and the scientist William Crookes. These three, together with Austin, Walt Whitman and Walt's young companion Henry Sutton, are planning a shipboard voyage to "Summerland" or the Afterlife. The ship rests on wheels upon dry land, however, and will be driven by a combination of astrich-generated electricity and the mysterious "ideoplosm" (contained in "Crookes tubes") which Madame Selavy apparently is able to exude from her breasts when in a spirit-uolist trance. Although Emily pooh-poohs the mod schemes of her brother's friends, she finds herself drawn into their venture, principally because of her yearning for the company and approval of Walt Whitman, the only true poet she has ever met...

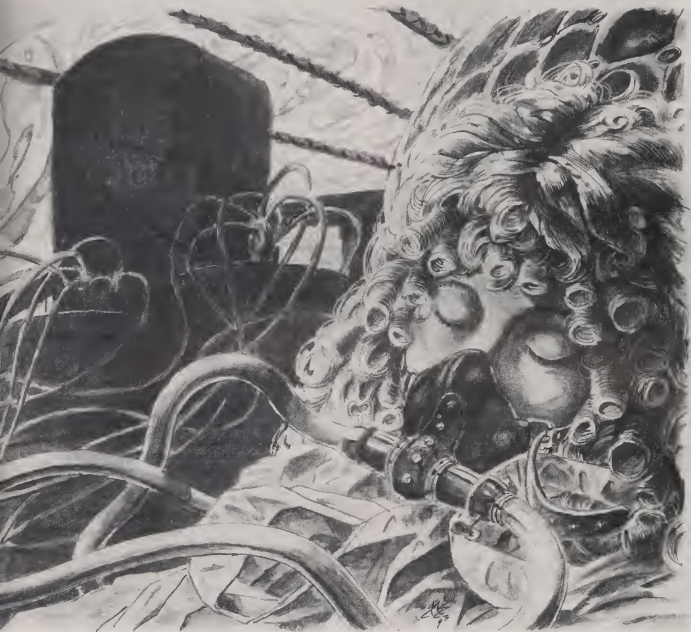
Emily's paralyzing shyness had prevented her from ever attending one of Sue Gilbert Dickinson's "Noctes Ambrosiana," whereat the cream of Amherst and visiting Boston society were wont to

gaily disport themselves. Only through articles clipped from the *Boston Transcript* and pasted into her scrapbook – alongside journalistic eulogies, nature essays and comic japeries – did she share the excitement of those fêtes.

But she imagined that no matter how thrilling and splendid those parties had been, none could have compared with the tension and excitement generated now by the strange accoutrements and atmosphere and expectations in the converted parlour of The Evergreens.

Heavy blood-red draperies had been closed to cut off all traces of moonlight – and much of the natural nocturnal noise. Kabbalistic signs cut from paper had been hung with pushpins on the walls. A cone of what Davis had assured them, before leaving the room, was "genuine Hindoo incense" smoldered in a saucer, perfuming the air with pagan mystery. The only illumination came from a pair of thick corpse-pale candles.

Why, it hardly seemed as if they were in New England any more!



A flimsy side-table had been pressed into service as the main prop. Around it were crammed seven chairs, five of which were occupied: along one side sat Emily and, on her left, Walt; clockwise from the Manahatta singer sat Sutton, Austin and Crookes. The two empty chairs intervened between this latter personage and Emily.

Beneath the table the sitters' knees pressed in an intimacy which, had their purposes not been strictly scientific, would have been most immodest.

Emily could sense a strangeness in the air. It accorded with those rare solitary moments when she had sensed that the veil between the living and the dead was thinner than most people suspected –

*Of nearness to her sundered Things  
The Soul has special times –  
The Shapes we buried, dwell about,  
Familiar, in the Rooms –  
Untarnished by the Sepulchre,  
The Mouldering Playmate comes –  
In just the Jacket that he wore –  
Long buttoned in the Mould,*

Since we – old mornings, Children – played –  
Divided – by a world –

Inclined by these premonitions to overcome her natural distaste of Madame Selavy and to give the French mystic all possible benefit of doubt, up till the final test, Emily waited patiently for the medium and her mentor to make their appearance, reminding herself that if her beloved Elizabeth Barrett could endure such foolishness, so could she.

All participants, however, were not so easygoing.

"What a damn fool way to settle a scientific matter!" exploded Professor Crookes, after some moments of painful squirming.

An altercation between Davis and Crookes had arisen, concerning the exact placement of the ideoplastic tubes aboard the ship. Davis had argued for arranging them in a ritualistic pentagram, whereas Crookes had opted for a more Euclidean disposition designed to project their force symmetrically. Finally, both parties had agreed to arbitration by the spirit world – although Crookes appeared now to be regretting his decision.

Before the naturalist could voice further petulance, however, the door opened and in walked the Seer of Poughkeepsie and Madame Selavy.

Davis wore his usual suit and spectacles, but had crowned himself with a purple satin turban, its ends fastened with a large paste brooch. To Emily's eyes, the whole affair suspiciously resembled a lady's sash she had seen in the fashion pages of *All The Year Round*. Barefoot and bare-armed, Madame Selavy wore a flowing, loose-fitting white muslin robe. From the way in which her plentiful flesh jiggled beneath it, she had apparently abandoned all stays and corsets—the better, perhaps, to let the ideoplasm circulate...

Davis raised his hands in a gesture of blessing. "Madame Selavy's meditation has placed her psyche in accord with the higher forces. She is now primed and ready to flow! In the name of Asar-Un-Nefer and Sekhet, of Alampis and Kobah, of Belial and Ishvadevata, let the gates now be thrown open!"

Madame Selavy took her seat at the head of the table, placing her immediately at Emily's right hand. Meanwhile, Davis erected a parchment screen in front of the two candles, plunging the room into further gloom. Then he took the last empty chair, between Crookes and the medium.

"All please join hands, and seek to calm and open your minds. The spirits are extremely sensitive to negativity. And remember—under no conditions must you break the ring until the séance is officially terminated! I cannot be responsible for what might happen should you do so."

Emily thought that Davis had glared at her specifically at the mention of "negativity." But the shadows were too thick to be certain.

In any case, she now did as instructed: with her left hand she gripped Walt's big paw; with her right she submitted to Madame Selavy's plump and clammy grip.

As soon as the circle was complete, a wind seemed to arise from nowhere, causing the candles to shudder. On Madame Selavy's face appeared a look of tortured strain. Emily saw sweat spring out on her moustached upper lip.

A series of loud raps suddenly sounded from a distant corner of the parlour! At the same time, the table jounced and bucked like a capering colt, through no apparent material intervention.

Davis spoke in hushed tones. "The spirit guide, or epipsychidion, is now entering Madame's very body."

The medium's eyes rolled upwards, showing only white. Then, in a high girlish voice unlike her own deep timbre, she spoke.

"Why Big Chief Davis call-um little Pink Cloud?"

"Princess Pink Cloud! How grateful we are that you could reach us! We realize what an effort it is for you to disengage yourself from the splendours of Summerland to speak with us mere mortals—"

Crookes interrupted. "Enough with the ghostly pleasantries! Ask her about the tubes!"

Davis was imperturbed. "Princess Pink Cloud, my friend, although abrupt, has indeed raised the object of our conference. We need to know the proper disposition of the ideoplastic containers on our vessel. Would you kindly instruct us?"

There was a pause. Then: "Ugh! Is hard to see—Wait!

Make-um the sacred seal. But also put-um tubes high and low, to cover-um big canoe like a chief's buffalo hide cover-um floor of teepee."

"Humph!" said Crookes, but appeared mollified at the compromise.

"Thank you, Princess. You may leave now—"

"Wait!"

It was Austin. Emily winced at the contortions of grief evident on her brother's face.

"Please, can you give me a message from my unborn children? Do they know I'm coming to hold them?"

"The little ones which the bad squaw kill-um wait-um for their father in happy hunting ground."

Tears coursed down Austin's face. "Thank you, Princess, thank you—"

Hardening her heart to Austin's grief, Emily now spoke up in accordance with a plan she had secretly devised and kept hidden, even from Walt.

"I too have a question for the spirit, if I may."

Davis hesitated a moment, then said, "Certainly. But I can guarantee nothing."

"I understand. Princess, my question is for Leonard Humphrey, my old teacher. Can you reach him?"

Madame Selavy twisted and writhed before finally replying, "Yes, Leonard be-um with me here."

"Ask him please what he meant when he said to me that my poems were 'dross.'"

"Ugh! Leonard make-um big apology. He say-um that he could not see-um their worth with living eye. But now he see-um they very good chants."

Emily smiled. "Thank you, Princess."

Humphrey had never said any such thing to Emily, had in fact never even seen any of her juvenile outpourings, for she had been too timid to disclose them.

"If no one else has a question—Very well, we shall bring this séance to a close."

Madame Selavy spoke. "Princess Pink Cloud want-um to wave goodbye."

"An ideoplastic manifestation! We are honoured, Princess!"

Being closest to the medium, Emily was the first to spot the manifestation. The shadowy portion of the medium's robe that stretched across her lap billowed and seemed to lift, taking shape as it grew. (Emily hated to think where the "ideoplasm" was supposed to be issuing from this time.) In a few seconds a shiny pale arm and hand waved above the level of the table.

"Goodbye, goodbye. I see-um you in Summerland—"

Emily jumped to her feet, breaking her contact on both sides, and grabbed the ideoplastic limb.

Madame Selavy screamed! The table was knocked over—by Davis, Emily later assumed, though at the time it seemed to leap of its own will—and general chaos reigned.

By the time Walt had lit the whale-oil sconces on the wall, the tumult had died down.

And there stood Emily, holding triumphantly aloft her prize.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "A light armature on a telescoping rod, draped in wet muslin. I venture you'll find a slit in her robe where it protruded, while she wiggled it with her toes!"

The men had carried the seemingly unconscious Madame Selavy to a couch, where she lay prostrate. From his position of deep concern by her side, Davis now glared at Emily.

"Of course that's what it looks like now! Once you ruptured the link with the medium, the ideoplasm reverted to its nearest earthly semblance! I only hope you haven't killed her, with your sacrilegious disrespect!"

Emily threw down the apparatus. "With such logic, I could make a hummingbird into a dragon! If you believe this faker, you're all loco. I only hope I can keep myself from falling over with laughter when your expedition goes bust!"

Exerting obvious self-control, Austin approached his sister. "It's a certainty that you won't be there, after this brazen insult."

Emily laughed. "Oh, but you're wrong, Austin. I shall be there, and not just as a spectator, but as one of the crew! It's that, or else I shall wire Father with news of this whole sordid affair! And believe me, a mundane telegraph works just as well as a celestial one!"

Mention of the Squire caused Austin to blanch. The wind had been effectively taken out of his sails.

Now Crookes tried to reason her out of it. "Why are you so bent on accompanying us, Miss Dickinson, if you have no faith in our success?"

Emily moved to stand by Walt. "I'm going to protect those I love from being made fools of and hurt!"

Neither affirming nor denying Emily, Walt said, "Are our dreams so shaky, sirs, that we cannot afford a clear-eyed skeptic among us? Her presence will not hinder us, if our theory is sound."

A groan wafted from the couch. Everyone turned to the recumbent medium.

"Let the petite unbeliever set sail with us. It matters not. For she shall never return!"

The parade of ostriches through the streets of Amherst attracted not a little attention, from gentry and mudlark alike.

Led by Henry Sutton, chivvied gently onward from the rear by a switch-wielding Walt – whose informal uniform, for once, fit his role of herder – the big magnificent tropical birds trotted proudly down the dusty thoroughfares, pulling spectators in droves after them.

Emily had to scurry to keep up with the parade of men, women and capering children: not an easy task in her long white dress. Finally, she gathered up her skirts, desperately exposing several inches of ankles and calves, and managed to catch up with Walt.

A little Madness in the Spring is wholesome even for a King, Emily reminded herself. And the Lord knew, this had been the maddest Spring of her life!

It had taken not one but three days to arrange the ideoplastic propulsion devices to the satisfaction of both Crookes and Davis. So had Emily ascertained, from daily visits to the Common. She had barely suppressed her laughter at the sight of so much useless activity; surely the tubes would prove as much a hoax as Madame Selavy's third arm and hand...

During this time, Austin and Sutton had been kept busy loading various supplies aboard the schooner: tents, bottled water, foodstuffs, ropes, ostrich fodder. Emily was reminded of those Cattle smaller than the Bee, whose tillage is the passing Crumb –

As for Walt, he had simply disappeared after the séance. A brief note had turned up that next morning

at Emily's breakfast setting, quoting one of the wanderer's own poems:

*Afoot and light-hearted, I take to the open road,  
Healthy, free, the world before me,  
The long brown path before me leading wherever I  
choose.*

Emily had cracked her soft-boiled egg with no apparent tremor of her hands, while inside she was all awahl with uncertainty.

She had not meant to state her love for Walt aloud, least of all during such a confused public event as a séance! Yet she had. Under whatever devilish impulse, she had blurted out her true feelings for Walt – feelings she had hardly been willing to admit even to herself.

And now her words, it seemed, had caused the object of her affections to bolt. Was it that he did not reciprocate her deep devotion – or that he felt too strongly toward her to trust himself around her? Probably the former.

*My Worthiness is all my Doubt –  
His Merit – all my fear –  
Contrasting which, my quality  
Do lowlier – appear –*

*Least I should insufficient prove  
For his beloved Need –  
The Chiefest Apprehension  
Upon my thronging Mind –*

Well, there was no way to retract her words, even if she had wanted to, no action she could do take until – if – Walt returned.

So she calmly ate her egg.

But this very morning, drawn to her Main Street bedroom window by the unmistakably unique noise of a passing flock of ostriches, Emily had seen the shaggy figure of her beloved.

Emily made a hasty toilet. Carlo, sensing her excitement and urgency, barked and bounded. A sudden wave of feeling passed over Emily. She knew with certainty that by plunging after Walt, she was embarking on a grand adventure that might separate her from her pet forever, by elopement or marriage, death or madness.

Emily gave the big dog a hug, then locked it in the bedroom.

By the time she made her way down to the street, the procession was some distance ahead. Hence the need for her indelicate haste.

Now she drew up even with the hirsute shepherd. "Walt! Walt!"

Obediently, Walt stopped. The flock continued on without him, the crowd encircling them and preventing their escape. Soon, the two poets were alone, the hustle and bustle dying away as the parade disappeared around a bend.

Walt had not moved. Emily came around to look in his face. His placid, manly features, she was relieved to see, revealed no distaste or distress at her appearance, as she had half-feared they would. Quite to the contrary, he smiled gently at her, and doffed his floppy black hat.

"Emily, dearest, I am glad to see you once more before our departure."

"It is today, then! Let's hurry, or they'll leave without us!"

"You do not still propose to endanger yourself on such a chancey expedition, I pray..."

"Of course! I don't foresee any risk – but even if there were, do you think I would let my Master rush into it without me?"

Walt sighed, and replaced his hat. Taking Emily by the elbow, he said, "Let us walk. I can think better then. It is how I have been spending the last several days."

They set out toward the centre of town. After a few yards, Walt spoke. "Emily, I do not think you really know me..."

"Oh, but I do, Walt, I do! Your soul is as clear as ice on a stream to me!"

"I must disagree. We have barely met, and you claim me as your 'Master.' That alone shows how poorly you perceive me. I am no person's master – not even my own, I fear! I am still a mystery to myself, after all these years. How could I be any less a mystery to you?"

"But I love you, Walt! Surely that transcends mere knowing!"

"It does, it does, I agree. But do you and I mean the same thing when we speak of love, Emily? Ever since I left my endlessly rocking cradle, I have been direly perplexed about the nature of love. I have been one that ached continually with amorous love. Does the earth not gravitate? Does not all matter, aching, attract all other matter? So the body of me to all I meet or know! I am not content with a mere majority – I must have the love of all men and all women on this earth!"

"And you have mine, Walt! My whole heart!"

"Emily, listen. Out of the rolling ocean, the crowd, you came to me gently, a drop like myself. You whispered, 'I love you. I have travelled a long way merely to look on you, to touch you.' And this is good. But I respond: 'Now that we have met and looked, we are safe! Return in peace to the ocean, my love. I too am part of that ocean, my love. We are never separated! Behold the great rondure, the cohesion of all, how perfect!'"

All Emily could hear were the words "my love," repeated twice. To travel to Summerland were superfluous: she was in Paradise already.

"Have it as you will, Walt. I am content. Let us join the others now."

"Only if you truly comprehend me, *ma femme*..."

"Yes, be assured. I do."

In silence, they walked the rest of the way to the Common.

The crowd was enormous. Not only did masses of people overspread the lawn, but they hung from the windows of neighbouring buildings. The young scholars of Fraternity Row, plainly already in their cups, were singing some raucous ditty about John Brown's body – evidently their idea of the proper sendoff for such a solemn voyage.

Emily was surprised that neither secular nor religious authorities had intervened to stop what was in essence a blasphemous expedition. She could only assume that both money and Dickinson influence had been brought to bear.

The ship itself – sails still unfurled – had been

transformed into some kind of bauble-bedecked Tannenbaum. From its rigging and superstructure hung the loaded Crookes tubes, connected by electrical cables. Their suspicious contents seemed to cast a nimbus around each, making the very air waver. It was a spooky effect, and Emily was still unable to conceive through what trickery Madame Selavy achieved it.

The last of the ostriches – Norma, thought Emily – was just being brought aboard, up a long gangplank with a gentle slope. Walt and Emily followed the bird aboard.

The rest of the crew awaited them.

Austin spotted Emily. She mustered her rebuttal to his expected rebuke, but was taken aback by his actual words.

"Although it is too late for you to carry out your threat by telegraphing Father, and so force your passage, you are still welcome to accompany us, sister. Despite your obvious and baseless antipathy toward Madame Selavy, she has graciously interceded on your behalf."

Emily eyed the medium suspiciously, and was returned a mocking curtsy and a smile that resembled the expression one of Vinnie's cats might wear when stalking its feathered prey.

Crookes now spoke. "If all hatchets have been at least temporarily buried, then perhaps we can move to a scientific footing. Our departure time is scheduled for exactly noon, and we still have a few items to attend to. Henry and Austin – please hoist the gangplank. And Mister Whitman – would you do these honours?"

Crookes handed Walt a bottle of champagne. Taking it, Walt replied, "I am privileged, sir," and advanced to the bow.

At the appearance of the poet, the crowd roared, then fell silent. Assuming the dignity that he brought to all his frequent public-speaking engagements, Walt addressed the spectators.

"These are the words of my good, grey friend, William Cullen Bryant, and I deem them meet for today."

"So live, that when the summons comes to join

"The innumerable caravan, which moves

"To that mysterious realm, where each shall take

"His chamber in the silent halls of death,

"Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,

"Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed

"By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave

"Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch

"About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams."

With his final words, Walt swung the bottle mightily against the hull of the ship, at the same time bellying.

"I christen thee Thanatopsis!"

Champagne and glass sprayed the nearest watchers. A stunned silence reigned. Walt turned to go, then re-faced the crowd.

"The clock indicates the moment – but what does eternity indicate?" he asked them.

No one answered, flippantly or otherwise.

Walt returned to the others. He seemed enlarged somehow in Emily's eyes, as if he were now casting off the restraints of civilization, preparing to match his big soul against death itself, flexing his spiritual

muscles in preparation for a celestial wrestling match.

"Well, cameradoes, our ship is nobly christened. It only remains to set sail. O captain, my captain – is it time?"

Crookes consulted a pocket watch. "Nearly. Let us take to our couches."

Davis spoke. "Soon we shall float on the Bay of Seven Souls. Princess Pink Cloud will hail us from atop the Garnet Cliffs, and our fondest dreams will become reality."

Austin said, "Soon I shall hold my babies."  
And c'est vrai, no medium shall rival me upon my return."

**C**onducting his crew sternwards, Crookes brought them to a circle of couches incongruously bolted to the deck. Within the circle was the pentagram of ideoplastic containers. Off to one side stood an elaborate arrangement of tightly stoppered metal tanks and a large odd clock. From the tanks ran several rubber hoses, two per couch. Each pair of hoses terminated in a gutta-percha face mask.

"Miss Dickinson, you are the only one unaware of our precautions, so listen closely. We have been warned by Princess Pink Cloud that the transition from earth to Summerland would drive a conscious human traveller mad. Therefore, we have elected to make the trip asleep, so to speak, as uncognizant of the dangers as one of Professor Agassiz's fossils.

"One of these tanks is filled with ether, a gas possessing the power to incapacitate the brain. Perhaps you have heard of it in connection with some recent childbirth experiments, at Massachusetts General Hospital – ? The other contains pure oxygen. The valves of both are controlled by this multum-in-parvo clock, a kind of electro-mechanical timing device. Five minutes before noon, the clock will trigger a blast of ether into our masks. At noon, the same device will close the circuit in the propulsion tubes. A mere sixty seconds will suffice to make the transition, at which point we will be awakened by a gale of fresh oxygen. Now, are you willing to entrust your life to such a mechanism?"

The scientist's confident demeanour – similar in kind to Walt's new bravado – inspired Emily. She answered, "If you warrant the contraption, then I place my faith in it – and in you, sir."

Crookes smiled. "Very well, then. The hour approaches! Ladies and gentlemen – couches, please!"

On the horsehair cushions the intrepid cross-dimensional argonauts laid themselves down.

Emily gingerly picked up her face mask and tied it on. Covering her nose and mouth as it did, it imparted a stifling, claustrophobic sensation, as if she were being immured in one of the newest Fisk Metallic Burial Cases.

Truly, she felt already dead, her oldest dreads finally realized.

Walt had taken a couch across the circle from her. Emily caught his eye. He winked, and she felt better.

The sun was directly overhead, and the noise of the crowd came to Emily as a wordless booming surf.

A hiss of escaping gas sounded. Emily held her breath until her lungs nearly burst, but was forced in the end to inhale.

Sleep is the station grand, down which, on either hand, the hosts of Witnesses stand!

As she drained the final dregs of oblivion, she heard a relay click, followed by the very Crack of Doom.

**H**er Dust connected – and lived.

Upon her Atoms were Features placed, august, absorbed and numb.

She was a Creature clad in Miracle.

It was Anguish grander than Delight.

It was – Resurrection Pain.

If Death was a Dash, she was most definitely cishyphen.

Still recumbent on her couch, noting dazedly that the noon sky above her had changed somehow to sunset hues – a shroud of gold and crimson, tyrian and opal – Emily reached a shaky hand up to her face and struggled to remove her mask.

Above her appeared the figure of Walt, concerned.

"Here, Emily – allow me."

He undid her mask and helped her to sit. Emily forced her eyes to focus on her fellow travellers, who were gradually coming to and rising, weakly doffing their anaesthetic gear.

"Are you all right?" Walt asked her.

"I – I believe so. Though I am almost afraid to own this body somehow. What happened? Did we actually pass across death's border?"

"I assume so. But let us help the others, and then we'll see what we can see."

Soon, all seven voyagers were standing, however weakly.

Then, for the first time, they dared to lift their eyes and look outward, beyond the *Thanatopsis*.

What they saw made them move somnabulistically as one to the ship's port rail.

The *Thanatopsis* sat on its wheels in the middle of an apparently infinite, perfectly flat plain, whose circumambient horizon seemed queerly further off than its earthly counterpart.

And the plain was covered with emerald-green, almost self-luminous grass, cropped or mown or inherently self-limited somehow as smooth as the lawn of some Vast Estate. Any other feature there was none.

In stunned silence they stood, until from Walt pealed immense gales of laughter, followed by exuberant, near manic speech.

"Oh, my sweet Lord! I was right, right all along! How fine, how just, how perfect! Has any poet ever received surer confirmation of his visions? Please, someone – ask me what this grass is!"

Emily complied. "What – what is this grass, Walt?"

Walt puffed up his chest and declaimed, "A child said, 'What is the grass?' fetching it to me with full hands. How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he. I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven. Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord, a scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt, bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say 'Whose?' Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation. Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic, the beautiful uncut hair of graves!"

Young Sutton began to clap. "Bravo, Walt! You

seen it all before we even got here!"

Now Davis hesitantly spoke. "My calculations must have been off a trifle. This is plainly not the Bay of Seven Souls."

"I should say not," averred Crookes.

"I must consult my maps in the cabin. Certainly such a large geographical feature as this green desert will appear, even if only as a bit of Summerland incognita. In any case, there is no need to worry. Once Princess Pink Cloud senses our location telepathically, she will materialize here and conduct us by astral means to the Castle of Cochineal, where we shall sit in colloquy with Aristotle and Socrates, Chaucer and Shakespeare, among innumerable other spiritual luminaries."

Davis turned hopefully to Madame Selavy. "Can you establish contact with the Princess, my dear Hrose?"

Madame Selavy rolled her eyes back in her head and strained her facial ligatures, as if attempting to pass not ideoplasm, but a kidney stone.

"The cosmic telegraph is full of noise. I am overwhelmed by the nearness of so many spirits —"

Emily was about to ask what spirits? when her brother spoke.

"Has anyone noticed the sun?"

Everyone gazed now askance at the bloated orange orb, poised a mere degree or two above the horizon. For a full five minutes they regarded it, during which time it moved not a whit.

A tear pricking her cheek, Emily ended the silence. "The Dusk kept dropping — dropping — still. No Dew upon the Grass — but only on my Forehead stopped — and wandered in my Face. I know this Light. 'Tis Dying I am doing — but I am not afraid to know."

"'Tis dying you've done," contradicted Crookes. "This is something quite other."

With that, Crookes, making an obvious effort to shake off his stunned ennui, moved decisively toward the hold where the ostriches could be heard plaintively calling.

"Austin, Henry — come help me manage the birds on their treadmills. We must recharge the Voltaic piles in case a speedy departure becomes necessary. Mister Davis — I suggest you and Madame concentrate on establishing our whereabouts and that of any of Summerland's putative inhabitants. As for our two bards, you may continue to churn out your amusing little lays until further orders."

The party split up into its various factions, leaving Walt and Emily alone at the rail.

Despite their unforeseen and inexplicable circumstances, Emily felt a growing confidence and ease. Whether it was Walt's jubilation, which shone now from every ounce of his brawny frame, or Crookes's captainly aura, or a combination of the two, she could not say. But whatever the source, she found she was not fearful of her fate in this strange place, but rather expectant.

Upon the point of sharing these sentiments with Walt, Emily espied twin autumn rivulets of tears freshly coursing through his beard.

"Walt, what troubles you?" said Emily, taking one of his hands in hers.

"It's the grass. It speaks to me."

"What is it saying?"

"It claims — it claims to be my father."

For a short interval longer, Walt continued to listen to something Emily could not hear. Then, shaking himself, he resumed a less introspective manner.

"Green tide below me! I see you face to face! Clouds of the west! Sun there forever half an hour high! I see you also face to face!" He turned fully to Emily. "We have made a crossing greater than any I undertook on Brooklyn Ferry — and I thought those quite supernal! But now we are where time nor place avails not, nor distance either. We are now with the men and women of all generations, past, present and future. This I affirm."

At that moment the three men who had gone belowdecks emerged. All wore various degrees of discomfiture, from Crookes's extreme agitation, to Austin's disconcerted bewilderment, to Henry Sutton's sympathetic incomprehension.

"Captain," called Walt, "what transpires?"

Crookes removed a silk handkerchief from his vest pocket and mopped his brow. His face was white as Emily's favourite wildflower, the Indian Pipe.

"The piles refuse to take a charge. Everything is perfectly in order. We just can't generate a current. It's — it's as if we're operating under a new set of natural laws..."

Emily said, "Does this mean that we're trapped here, Professor?"

"I fear so. At least as far as science can help us. Let us see what the psychic half of our team can contribute..."

Crookes advanced to the bulkhead door that led to the living quarters. There he knocked.

"Mister Davis! Madame Selavy! Please join us. We have something to tell you."

Muffled whispers could be heard from within. The whispers gradually increased in loudness and stridency until they terminated in a plainly voiced "Batârd!" followed by the sound of a palm connecting solidly with flesh.

Shortly thereafter emerged Paris's finest medium and the Seer of Poughkeepsie; the latter bore a florid handprint on his cheek.

Madame Selavy spoke. "I was in contact with Princess Pink Cloud when an evil entity took possession of me. The vile beast materialized an ideoplastic hand and attacked cher Davis. It was only by the most magnificent efforts that I was able to cast out the intruder and preserve my sanity."

Despite their troubles, Crookes smiled. "I see. And what was the Princess able to tell you?"

"Tout le monde may feel safe. Our appearance here was planned by the spirits. They rerouted our vessel to this green wasteland on purpose. Our earthly souls are not purified enough yet to sustain a tête-à-tête with the spirits in their own domain. Princess Pink Cloud is sorry, but there was no alternative. She had no way of knowing this until we actually arrived. After all, our expedition is *un premier*. We are therefore instructed to return immediately to the lower spheres and perfect our souls before essaying another trip."

"I wish I could comply, Madame, as I believe it's our soundest course. But unfortunately, our electrical system is dead."

"What?!" shrieked Madame Selavy, hurling her bulky self upon Crookes and pummelling his chest with blows. The slim savant bore up admirably under the formidable assault. "You lie, you lie, you slimy dogsbody! We can't be trapped in this goddamn place! You got us here, you miserable alchemist! Now you'll damn well get us out!"

The medium's storm of blows dribbled to a halt, and she collapsed to the deck in a faint. Walt and Austin helped lift her to a couch.

"Madame's accent seems to have been our first fatality," drily commented Crookes.

"Plainly another case of possession brought on by the shocking news," faintly defended Davis. "I assume, by the way, that you were not jesting..."

"You assume correctly."

Walt said, "Perhaps we should sit down to a little sustenance, and plan our next move."

"A capital idea."

"I'll set the table," volunteered Emily, happy to have something useful at last to do.

Soon the party of six were sitting down to a simple collation, laid out upon a sideboard she recognized from the Evergreens. They ate in a sombre silence. Emily noticed for the first time the lack of insect noises. Apparently, the astral prairie was void of cricket or cicada, beetle or fly.

As they were finishing, Madame Selavy joined them. Making no reference to her outburst, she tucked in heartily to the repast.

When she had finished, Crookes broached their choices.

"As I see it, we can simply sit here on our useless vessel until all our supplies are gone and we die of sheer inanition. Or we can set out across the placid wilderness in hopes of finding something or someone who can help us. Does anyone have any other ideas?"

No one spoke.

"Very well, then. Let us put it to a vote. Mister Whitman?"

"Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors from their jambs! If we be only one hour from madness and joy, then confine me not!"

"I take that as a vote to walk. Miss Dickinson?"

"When Death's carriage stops, one must enter."

"Another yea. Let us cut this short. Does anyone wish to sit tight? No? So be it. Let us make ready."

The decision galvanized all the voyagers, and they sprang into action. The ostriches were lofted from the hold by means of winch and sling. Two of the animals were reserved as mounts for the ladies; the others were quickly burdened with all the supplies. The gangplank was lowered and the haltered birds were driven down it. They were soon joined by the humans, who stepped tentatively onto the alien lawn, but found it to be, as best as they could discern, conventional sod.

"All that remains is to choose a direction," said Crookes, compass in hand.

Walt said, "May I volunteer an encomium from one of my journalistic peers? 'Go west, young man!'"

"Any other suggestions? Very well, west it is."

With Emily and Madame Selavy riding a demure, albeit somewhat slippery sidesaddle - Emily on Norma, Madame on Zerlina - the expedition set out.

Some hundred yards from the ship, they paused



"THE BABE OF THE VEGETATION"

and turned to bestow one final nostalgic look on the craft.

"Goodbye, my fancy!" called Walt.

And with his farewell seeming to float in the air, the travellers resumed their journey into the sunset-canopied green unknown.

**E**mily had always loved sunsets. The Housewife sweeping with her many-coloured Brooms; golden Leopards in the sky; Ships of purple on Seas of daffodil; a Duchess born of fire; the Footlights of Day's Theatricals – The gaudy aerial punctuation to the day's sentence had always seemed to her like one of God's more inspired authorial decisions.

But now, after eight hours of travel beneath the subtly varying yet essentially repetitive circus of Summerland's riotous skies, Emily was convinced that it would not matter to her if she never saw another coloured clown-cloud in her life! The mindless spectacle of the skies now wore on her nerves like the continual moaning of an idiot. Emily could tell that the others were experiencing similar sensations.

Riding beside Emily, Madame Selavy exhibited a downcast apathy relieved only when she chose to cast a malign glare Emily's way. Leading Emily's long-necked and feathered mount, Austin shuffled along with eyes fixed on the unchanging turf, as did the Poughkeepsian Seer, who guided Madame's beast. Crookes and Sutton, each responsible for his own string of pack-ostriches, were plainly preoccupied with their own gloomy thoughts. The only member of the expedition to still exhibit the smallest measure of confidence and vivacity, in fact, was Walt.

The Paumanok Singer had soon assumed the role of pointman for the walkers. Striding out a few yards ahead of the others, he had made the opening hours of their journey pass cheerfully with a recitation of some of his inspirational poems.

"Me imperturbe! Standing at ease in Nature, aplomb in the midst of irrational things, imbued as they are, passive, receptive, silent as they. O to be self-balanced for contingencies, to confront night, storms, hunger, ridicule, accidents, rebuffs, as the trees and animals do!"

Walt would turn and bow comically upon the close of each verse, making a broad sweep with his hat in hand, and the others would stop and clap – urged on loudest by Emily – giving the ostriches a chance to crop at the infinite expanse of fodder, which they appeared to find congenial.

This monotonous greensward had quickly become as wearisome as the skies. If only there were just one simple Dandelion amid this infinite Alas, to proclaim that the sepulture was o'er!

But flowers there were none.

When the birds had browsed sufficiently, the humans would resume their walk at a moderate pace, having agreed without speaking that there was no point in hurrying and wearing themselves out.

After the first several hours, they halted for a longer rest. Standing on Walt's shoulders, Henry Sutton was just able to descry the masts of the Thanotopsis, apparently unchanged. Victuals were consumed, as well as refreshing draughts of their bottled water.

"This simple beverage," observed the ever-rational Crookes, "which we never gave a thought to from day

to day back in Amherst, now puts an upper limit on our survival. Unless we encounter a new source of water, we shall all expire painfully from thirst long before our food runs out."

"A death almost as cruel as my unborn children suffered," chimed in Austin. "If only we could contact the poor lost babes, I'm sure they would be able to help us. Madame – can't you give it another go?"

The seeress appeared to have regained her Paris tones. "Of course I am willing to try, cher Austin. Come, let us form the circle of power."

Seated on the soft living carpet, they all joined hands. Madame Selavy closed her eyes and began her invocation. "Zelator, Sothis, Ullikummi – open the gates! Although we are unworthy, grant us audience!"

The air was heavy with expectation. But despite Madame's energetic grunts – which served to signal her earnest efforts – their hopes remained unfulfilled.

"Well, it didn't hurt to try," said Crookes after the circle had been broken and they were all standing again. "But it's beginning to look as if there are actually no spirits here to respond to our pleas. I'm starting to suspect that this place is merely another mundane world, perhaps orbiting a different star from ours, which we have accidentally reached somehow, and hence no spiritual abode."

Young Sutton now surprised one and all by breaking his usual self-sufficient silence and interjecting a comment. "Nope, I can't agree with you there, Prof. This place is the afterlife, sure as my Paw wore whiskers. But what I want ter ask you is, how we gonna know when we actually die? If we just go ter sleep extra thirsty and wake up dead, what'd we notice different about the scenery?"

Crookes laughed heartily and slapped Sutton on the back. "An excellent conundrum, man! Worthy of Thomas Aquinas himself!"

Walt brushed the crumbs of his meal off his trousers. They landed in the grass and lay there looking, thought Emily, unutterably alien, like boulders in the midst of a parlour. Where were the members of the busy minor Nation which on Earth would have carried them away?

The burly poet sought to ameliorate the attitude of defeat that hung palpably over the group.

"Come, my tan-faced children! Follow well in order, for we cannot tarry here! We must march, my darlings! We must bear the brunt of danger, we the youthful sinewy races. All the rest on us depend. We are the pioneers!"

"More like 'prisoners,'" countered Crookes. But he too fell into line with a slight smile.

That brief illusion of hope had not lasted long, however. Footsore slogging soon became the rule of the day. Even Walt had eventually ceased his orations, joining the others in silent dejection.

**F**or Emily, the most brutal physical aspect of the trip so far had manifested itself as an embarrassing soreness in her posterior. The downy cushion of Norma's back had soon become a rock-hard seat of torment. Emily had switched to walking for a while, but found herself becoming too fatigued to keep up with the others. Her daily housebound existence had not fitted her for such a trek, and she was forced despite her aching buttocks to resume her mount.

Now, Crookes raised a hand to call another halt. He took out his pocket-watch and said, "By Amherst time, it is now eight in the evening. I propose we make camp for the, ahem, 'night,' and set out again at 'dawn.' Agreed? Fine. Let's get the tents set up, men."

The ostriches, temporarily freed of their burdens, were hobbled to graze. Three tents were broken out of the rest of the equipment, and unfolded onto the lawn.

"Austin, Davis and myself," said Crookes, "shall share one lodge. Walt and Hen will make a pair. And the ladies will have their own shelter. Now, let's get our encampment in order. Although the sky does not seem to threaten rain, this lawn must be watered somehow, sometime."

Nothing could have been less welcome to Emily than the prospect of spending a night side by side with the disagreeable and, she had realized from prolonged proximity, the noticeably garlicky Madame Selavy. Yet there seemed no alternative, or at least she was too tired to think of one.

Emily watched the men drive stakes into the lawn and rig ropes. After a few minutes, a sudden breeze – the first to make itself felt in Summerland – caused her to turn.

What she saw left her Lungs Stirless, their Cunning Cells incapable of even a Pantomime breath.

Less than a dozen feet away from the encampment, an oval patch of grass had come alive with motion.

It was if the soil were a-boil with the activity of a hundred thousand wriggling earthworms. The earth rippled and churned. And the grass itself was not immune from this bewitchment. Every blade seemed possessed of its own will, dancing and intertwining with its neighbours like the tendrils of a squid.

It seemed forever that Emily watched appalled, though it must have been only seconds. At last, finding her voice, she called out weakly, "Someone – help!"

In a trice the other members of the party had surrounded her. Emily pointed wordlessly, and they gaped for one.

For now the grass was cohering! Acquiring shape and solidity, the individual blades were losing their identities, growing and weaving themselves into a seamless fabric.

And that billiard-table-green fabric, moulding itself around an invisible armature or skeleton, soon assumed the lustre of green flesh – and the form of a perfect naked male child!

The transformation of the turf over, he lay there on his back, breathing, with eyes yet closed.

The babe of the vegetation.

No one gave utterance to his or her astonishment, till Walt spoke.

"The prairie grass dividing, its special odour breathing, I demand of it the spiritual corresponding. I demand the blades to rise in words, acts, beings, and go with its own gait..."

As Walt trailed off, the green child opened his eyes and gazed upward with mild wonder at the sky.

Walt took a step toward the boy.

Emily grabbed his sleeve. "No, Walt, don't! We don't know what manner of creature he is –"

With a note of gentle reprimand, Walt answered, "If I wish to speak to anyone I see, who shall say me no?"

Emily reluctantly released his sleeve, and Walt closed the distance between himself and the boy in a few decisive steps.

Squatting down beside the child, Walt said, "Son, can you hear and understand me?"

The child's voice was sweet as clover. "Yes."

"Where are you? What has happened to you?"

The child blinked, its green lashes sweeping over green eyes. "I – I was old. Sick. Dying. I – I died."

Emily drew breath sharpened like a stake. So it was true. They were in Summerland, the anteroom to Paradise... Old religious tremblings overtook her.

"What year did you die?" queried Walt.

"Year? Oh, you speak of time. The year was nineteen – nineteen ninety something – I can't remember."

Now Crookes found his tongue. "This is preposterous! How can we be talking to the spirit of someone who hasn't even lived yet?"

"Time is not a simple matter," Davis warned. "It is quite conceivable that Summerland is coexistent with all ages, past, present and future. Such a theory would explain the precognition exhibited by certain spirits..."

"What was your mortal name?" asked Walt.

"Name?" said the child, as if it were the most foreign of words. "I think I had a name. It's all fading so fast. Allen. Allen Ginsberg. Is that a name?"

Walt laughed at the sound of the mundane syllables amid so much strangeness, and clapped a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Indeed it is, and a fine Hebraic one at that."

At Walt's touch, a look of amazement transfigured the child's features. "You're Walt Whitman!" he said. Then, as if overcome by the knowledge, the boy swooned away.

Alarmed, Walt quickly scooped the child up in his arms and stood.

Where the boy had been born, the prairie was clean of grass in a neat outline of his form, revealing the fecund brown earth below.

But even as they watched, new grass thrust its spears up through the soil, stopping its accelerated growth when it was level with its cousins. Soon, nothing distinguished the spot.

Walt carried the boy into the circle of tents and sat him down with his back against a bundle of equipment. Unstopping a bottle of water, he sprinkled some into the face of the child.

Allen – for so Emily now found herself thinking of the child – opened his eyes.

"The sea," said the boy. "I must find the sea and join the others in it..."

Allen got to his feet and began to walk toward the setting sun.

"Wait!" exclaimed Davis.

Allen obediently halted, his small unclothed form yet seeming to strain west.

"Is this the Tourmaline Sea you speak of?"

"It has no name. It is simply the sea. And I must go to it."

Austin reached out a hand toward the child, as if he wished to cradle him. "You seem to have gained knowledge of this land somehow, Allen. Can you help us find our loved ones here?"

"If they have reached the sea already, you seek

them in vain. And why do you call me 'Allen'?"

"But — you told us that was your name before you arrived here —"

The boy regarded them with utterly ingenuous frankness. "I was never anywhere but here, forever. I know only Summerland."

A fire would have been pleasant. A fire would have kept away the fear. A fire would have dispelled the gloom.

A cheerful blaze it would have been, as on a winter's night in The Homestead, when the entire Dickinson family would gather for a Bible reading, the three children still young, the Squire relaxed, Emily's mother less indisposed than nowadays. Perhaps it would even have been one of those rare occasions when Emily had been invited to climb into her father's lap, where he sat in his massive chair beneath that engraving of "The Forester's Family," a happy brood so unlike her own. And perhaps the Squire would have unbent enough actually to cosset his daughter, pet her hair and tell her she was a good girl, despite her being such a disappointment, too simple at age ten even to read a clock...

But there was nothing to burn here in Summerland, lest it be their own equipage.

And if there had been, would they have dared to start a fire that would inevitably scorch and damage this miraculous grass, an entity apparently capable of giving birth?

And would the grass have even let them?

So the disconsolate travellers were forced to sit in a circle around the wan glow of a single whale-oil lamp — much diminished by the glory of the polychrome sky — discussing their next "day's" moves in the light of recent events, prior to turning in.

Outside the range of the light, the huddled ostriches muttered petulantly, as if their dim brains were finally registering the abnormality of their surroundings.

Beyond the birds, Allen stood.

The strange, inscrutable child faced west, his long unchanging shadow reaching almost into the camp. Still as a jade statue, he appeared to be communing with someone or something the humans could not perceive. He had maintained this immobility for an hour, and seemed intent on continuing so for many more.

After confounding them with his response to Austin, the boy had made as if to leave.

"Please," pleaded Crookes at the last minute, "you must stay and help us."

"I will if he wants me to," said Allen.

And the green child pointed to Walt.

"It amazes me how he has fixed on you," said Crookes.

"It happened when we touched," said Walt. "There was a flow of intelligence between us. I daresay it would have happened with anyone else as well." Addressing the child solemnly, Walt said, "It would gladden my heart to hear your valved voice a while longer yet, my son."

"Then I will stay," said Allen.

It had seemed a major victory at the time.

But now their talk revealed how far from solving their problems they were.

Nervously twirling a bit of string around a finger, Crookes said, "Assuming Allen can help us reach the shore of this nameless sea, what do we gain? The Thanatopsis will be many miles away, so we will not be able to set sail — even if such a course should seem worthwhile. Granted, we might meet these other resurrectees, if Allen is to be believed. But if they are all as naive as he —"

"Maybe," said Austin, "there will be elders among them who will be able to help us..."

"What disappoints me most," said Davis, "is that the dead apparently forget everything about their earthly lives. And I was so looking forward to discoursing with Alexander the Great..."

"And I with my children," Austin echoed.

"Bah!" spat Madame Selavy. "This enfant vert is not one of the real spirits! He is some kind of unhuman devil, bent on leading us astray! Why, imagine — he did not even react when I mentioned Princess Pink Cloud! No, you may rest assured that I will know the true ghosts when we meet them. Have I not spoken with them for years?"

Crookes threw down his bit of twine and stood. "Well, this talk is getting us nowhere. Let us retire, and perhaps things will look brighter in the 'morning.'"

They all betook themselves to their assigned tents.

Beneath the lowering canvas assigned to the ladies, Madame Selavy moved quickly to establish her dominance.

"I will not put up with any snorting or fidgeting, Mam'selle. Watch your elbows, occupy only your half of the tent, do not snatch the blankets, and we will get along fine."

So saying, Madame Selavy flopped down on their rude pallet, arrayed herself grandly in three-quarters of the coverings, and, shifting onto her side so that her hams overhung Emily's portion of the mattress, began within thirty seconds to manufacture a moustache-fluttering snore.

Squeezing herself into the remaining space and trying to keep as much room between herself and the pungent seeress as possible, Emily lay sleepless on her back.

Neither she nor Walt had had much to say during the discussion just past. The miracle of Allen's birth seemed to preclude ratiocination. Emily knew that the true meaning of the manifestation could only be apprehended poetically, and she longed to hear what glorious thickets of verbiage Walt might have effused from the miracle...

After half an hour of such ruminations, Emily stealthily rose, and left the tent.

No one else stirred within the encampment, where the lamp still burned untended.

Emily approached Walt's tent. Timidly, she lifted a flap.

Young Sutton slept alone, his cherubic face peaceful.

Dropping the flap, Emily moved beyond the bivouac's fitful flame.

She found Walt sitting cross-legged beside Allen. The poet was as mesmerized as he had been aboard the Thanatopsis, when he had first heard the grass speak. Gingerly, Emily touched his shoulder.

Walt started, then turned his face upward. "Emily," he said, in the tones of one recognizing a childhood friend not seen for decades. "'Tis vigil strange I keep here this night. I am glad for human company. Come – sit here beside me."

Awkwardly, Emily folded her legs beneath her skirts and sank down to the velvety turf.

Allen paid no attention to the actions of the humans, but continued to stare off in the direction of the ever-setting sun.

Walt took one of Emily's hands in his. Her pulse raced like spring torrents.

"I am at peace now with my father," said the man, "even though I have not seen his soul clothed in human form, as I foolishly longed to. I have realized what I always knew, but had forgotten. My father is all around me, in the mossy scabs of the worm fences, in the heap'd stones, in the elder, mullein and poke-weed. I need search no further."

Emily felt ecstatic tears scald her cheeks. "Oh, Walt, I'm so happy for you."

Walt transferred his hands to her waist. "Let me share my renewed joy and strength with you, Emily."

And then he kissed her.

George Gould had kissed her once. But that was years ago. And he had been a smooth-faced youth, not a virile bearded man!

Walt broke away and whispered, "You villain touch! What are you doing? My breath is tight in its throat! Unclench your floodgates! You are too much for me. My sentries have deserted their posts..."

"Mine also..." said Emily.

And she drew him down with her onto the lawn.

Walt's hands were busy beneath her clothing. "Urge and urge and urge, always the procreant urge of the world. Out of the dimness, opposite equals advance. Always substance and increase, always sex. Always a knit of identity, always a breed of life. Learn'd and unlearn'd feel that it is so. To elaborate is no avail –"

"Don't, then!" hissed Emily.

Walt was atop her now, his face buried in her neck, his weight like a treetrunk splaying her legs. She smelled the scented herbage of his breast.

Emily clutched him tight, her mouth against his ear. "My river runs to thee, blue sea! Wilt welcome me? My river waits reply, oh sea – look graciously. I'll fetch thee brooks from spotted nooks. Say, sea – take me!"

Walt said, "Ma femme –" then pressed with slow rude muscle against her.

Emily cried, and bit her lip.

In the sky, a cloud bled alizarin.

Walt was moving slowly. "Ebb stung by the flow, and flow stung by the ebb. Love-flesh swelling and deliciously aching. Limitless limpid jets of love, hot and enormous. Quivering jelly of love, white-blow and delirious juice. Bridgroom night of love working surely and softly into the prostrate dawn, undulating into the willing and yielding day. I am lost in the cleave of the clasp and sweet-flesh'd day!"

"Yes, Walt – I am the day, and you are my night!"

"And now comes the dawn!"

Walt howled a barbaric yawp, and sagged onto her, eclipsing the sky.

Emily didn't see how the others could have failed to

hear Walt's climax. Surely they would be venturing out to see what the commotion was. But she made no move to escape Walt's embrace. She was not scared of their censure, here on the edge of dying in this strange land. Let everyone see what a royal hoyden she was!

Title divine is mine! The Wife without the sign!

Twisting her head slightly, Emily realized that her limited field of vision included the small feet of the green child. Upon resolving them, she had the strangest feeling that he was the improbable son of their just consummated union.

She waited for the others. But they never came.

Enchanted or exhausted, they had slept through Emily's coronation.

Finally, Walt stirred and removed his bulk from atop her.

"We should return, Emily, before we worry the others."

"Whatever you say, Walt."

As they walked back toward their separate tents, Emily felt a little sad and worried and tired, her exaltation fading.

"Walt?"

"Yes?"

"Did the Harebell loose her girdle to the lover Bee, would the Bee the Harebell hallow much as formerly?"

"I am for you, and you are for me, Emily. Not only for our own sake, but for other's sakes. You awoke to no touch but mine."

"Oh, Walt!"

**W**hen Emily awoke, this was how she felt.

*If all the griefs I am to have  
Would only come today,  
I am so happy I believe  
They'd laugh and run away!*

Lost in an eerie borderland between life and death with no prospect of rescue, she should have felt as miserable as her unlucky companions.

But Walt's attentions and embrace had allowed her to transcend her immediate condition.

At last she had captured her soul-mate, forging with him those immemorial carnal bonds which time could never snap. And what a catch! A tender yet rugged male deep enough to match her female needs, a wild poet with roots in the hidden wisdom of the universe.

Finally, Emily knew how her esteemed Elizabeth Barrett had felt when she had found her Robert. At that moment, Emily realized she had been secretly rather jealous of "the Portuguese" all these years.

Now she could easily let such juvenile emotions go.

As she stretched luxuriously in the otherwise empty tent, her long chestnut tresses undone and in rare disarray, Emily praised Walt for doing so much for her. She swore she would do as much for him. Whatever he wanted or needed, wherever he roamed, whatever he did, she would stand by him, as support and inspiration.

Great I'll be, or Small – or any size at all – as long as I'm the size that suits Thee!

Suddenly Emily could wait no longer to see her beloved. Hurriedly, she left the tent.

The others were sitting around the extinguished lamp, partaking of a light breakfast.

Walt loafed on the grass, one arm resting on a bed-roll, legs extended. His gaze was fixed on a single plucked blade held between thumb and forefinger.

"Ah, Miss Dickinson," called out Crookes, "we thought you had sneaked into the ether, so soundly did you sleep! But you have awakened just in time, as we're about to break camp. Walt, perhaps you'll tell Miss Dickinson what you've learned."

Now Walt looked up at Emily. His face betrayed none of what had passed between them last night, showing only his general benevolent and sunny impartiality, somewhat tempered by the stresses of their situation.

What a considerate lover, thought Emily. He seeks to hide our relationship and spare me any possible embarrassment. I will have to tell him in private that there is no such need. I would shout my love from the rooftops of Amherst...

Walt discarded the grass. "I have been speaking with Allen. During the 'night,' he learned more of what he has to do. He must find six of his peers to accompany him to the sea. Only as a unit will he and the others be able to achieve their destiny, and move on to the next plane of existence."

"It makes excellent sense," said Davis. "Seven is the mystic number supreme. Seven planets, seven days, seven metals and seven colours – As the properties of seven are powerful on earth, so must they be in Summerland."

"In this sense, then," Crookes extrapolated, "our own expeditionary force was incomplete and unbalanced until the late fortuitous addition of Miss Dickinson."

Madame Selavy hurriedly disposed of a pickled egg so that she could declaim, "I myself would have preferred to be un peu discomboobled, rather than have along such an unsympathetic intellect."

Even Madame could not fluster Emily this morning. She bestowed a gracious smile on the seeress and directed her words toward Crookes.

"I would not have missed this outing for the world, Professor."

Now Austin spoke up gloomily. "Unless Allen and his compatriots can help us get home, dear sister, that exchange might be precisely what we've bartered."

On this note of urgency, and without further delay, the exiles assembled their gear and were on their way, led today by the preternaturally obsessed and silent Allen, Walt in second place.

Somewhat, Crookes had ended up with the reins of Emily's mount, while Austin had taken a string of pack-ostriches. Finding themselves somewhat apart from the others, the Professor now engaged Emily in conversation.

"It seems to me that if we can project our first day's experiences with any justification, then we should witness the rebirth of a new soul out of the grass every 24 hours or so. Reckoning thus, it should take approximately a week to assemble the company required by Allen. I believe our supplies will stretch that far, with just a little caution. Though much beyond that point, I cannot hold out hope."

Emily appreciated Crookes talking so frankly and intelligently with her. He was really quite a nice man.

Though of course not so splendid as Walt. She tried to reply in similar fashion.

"What astonishes me, Professor, is that we are not literally stumbling over one child-soul or another at every single step."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Consider. How many millions and millions of dead have there been in the past, and how many millions more in the future? If Summerland is receiving any portion of them on a regular basis – though how the time disjuncture between the worlds figures, I cannot speculate – then the soil should be exploding with revenants every few feet. Ancient Romans and Greeks, Persians and Medes, not to mention future dwellers such as Allen."

Crookes was plainly awestruck by Emily's analysis. After a moment's cogitation, he replied, "I see no flaw in your reasoning, Miss Dickinson, and only two possible answers. Perhaps most of eternity's dead have already made the transition to Summerland. This would mean that we have arrived here at a special time, a unique moment in the history of the afterlife. As a scientist, however, I tend to regard every situation as representative, until proven unique. Therefore, I lean toward the second postulate."

"Which is?"

"That Summerland is practically infinite in extent. The dead are indeed arriving moment by moment in their teeming myriads – but scattered across a billion billion hectares."

"Then our meeting Allen so soon was sheer chance? And our prospects for meeting any of his necessary companions likewise dim?"

"It appears so. Unless, of course –"

"What?"

"We are assuming that the dead manifest themselves randomly, much like dandelions popping up in The Squire's front yard. There is another alternative –"

Emily supplied it. "That some Higher Principle ordains where they shall appear. That we were meant to meet Allen. And that our fate is in Unknown Hands."

Crookes looked disgusted. "How I hate to imagine some bearded Jewish elder as big as Mont Blanc continually peering over my shoulder and nudging my elbow! But I suppose anything is possible."

"Only events will prove which hypothesis is correct. After all, a rainbow convinces more than all philosophy."

Crookes laughed. "Miss Dickinson, you're quite a rare woman! Allow me to place my services at your complete disposal, should you ever need them."

"Thank you, Mister Crookes, but I already have a protector."

Crookes smiled slyly. "Ah, so that's how it is. Well, I wish you and your beau the best of luck. You both may need it."

Before Emily could completely decipher what Crookes implied, a shout rang out.

"Rebirth hot!" pealed Walt's clear tones.

Emily glanced significantly at Crookes, who shrugged as if in mock defeat. Together, they hurried with the others to where Walt and Allen stood.

The grass had already finished its transformation when they arrived. Congealed out of the thrashing

warp and weft of the chlorophyll, the figure of a girl-child lay. As the spectators watched, she opened her eyes.

"Don't touch her," warned Crookes. "Remember the adverse effect physical contact had on Allen —"

Emily bent over the sweet-faced child. "What was your name, dear?"

"Sill — Sill — Sylvia..."

"Is that all?"

"All I remember."

Emily wanted to hug the little girl, but refrained. "That's fine, darling. Look, here's a friend for you —"

Allen stepped forward and helped Sylvia up.

"The sea," she said as soon as they touched.

Without any reference to the humans, the pair of naked toddlers resumed their determined westward progress.

"Is it possible," asked Crookes, "for something to be both alluring and horrifying?"

"Have you never seen," asked Walt, "a common prostitute in the city of orgies, with her charnel-house body of love?"

Austin blanched and said, "Sir!" Madame Selavy tittered. Davis dealt with a speck on his glasses. Young Sutton chuckled.

Crookes turned to Emily with a lifted eyebrow, as if to say, *Good luck indeed!*

**T**he slow perpetual Day moved along, but arrived nowhere.

Emily heard its Axles go, as if they could not hoist themselves, they hated motion so.

No Seasons were to her, it was not Night or Morn. It was Summer set in Summer, centuries of June.

She was on an infinite trip down Ether Street.

Emily had lived an eternity in Summerland. This was simple fact. There had never been an Amherst. Lavina, Mother, The Squire, Carlo — all were figments of her imagination. All that had ever existed were the unchanging landscape, her human companions, and the gaggle of children.

There were six of them now: Allen, Sylvia, Hart, Delmore, Anne and Adrienne. Planted in the soil of Earth by their ignorant mourning loved ones, they had tunneled like industrious grubs, emerging out of their chrysalis, the mould, in Summerland, wearing the bright forms of youth, with Lethe-smoothed minds.

Never tiring, needing neither to eat nor sleep, the children would plainly have moved on toward their however-distant mystic sea without pause, had they not been constrained by the humans. The bond formed between Allen and Walt, however, still held, and the children would halt when the humans did.

At such times — irregular as they had become, as the travellers grew detached from earthly rhythms — the children would form a silent circle of introspection. Emily remembered the farcical séance conducted at The Evergreens; the children's circle resembled that imbroglia as Parliament resembled a caucus of crows.

What would happen when the seventh child was added, no one could predict. Even Allen claimed not to know...

Emily had no idea what kept the others going on this mad quest for escape from the afterlife. In her case, it was only love for Walt, and a dream of how



"THE CHILDREN SEPARATED INTO A LINE  
FACING THE OCEAN"

their life together back on Earth could be.

Emily and her Paumanok Paramour had not enjoyed another tryst since the first. Emily had not gone seeking Walt for another "midnight" assignation, and he had not come for her. This was fine. Even on the far side of death, it was well to observe propriety. Emily was content to know that their imperishable love still burned like a hidden volcano beneath the surface of their cordiality.

How red the Fire rocks below, how insecure the sod.  
Did I disclose, it would populate with awe my solitude!

She pitied the others their lack of such a bulwark, and tried to share her strength and cheer.

But on this day – perhaps the seventh since their arrival, perhaps the seven-hundredth – there was precious little hope to be found among the weary travelers.

When Walt's familiar shout shook them out of their torpor, they moved only sluggishly toward the reincarnation, despite its climactic significance.

"Our last tiresomely perfect child," drawled Crookes as they surrounded the ultimate babe of the vegetation. "Does anyone hear the Final Trump yet?"

Walt regarded the male child queerly, a look of rare unease on his face.

"Something startles me where I thought I was safest! How can it be that this ground itself does not sicken, so full of dead meat is it? Where are the foul liquids it is stuffed with? If I run a furrow with my plough, I am sure to expose some of the foul meat! Every mite of this compost once formed part of a sick person, generations of drunkards and gluttons!"

Walt fell to his knees and dug his fingers into the soil. "The very wind should be infectious!"

Emily hastened to Walt's side, dropped down and hugged him. "Walt, please! We need you! Do not succumb to delirium – for my sake!"

Gradually, his sobbing abating, Walt recovered. He stood and brushed soil-clotted hands on his pants. "Very well. I am not an earth, nor the adjunct of an earth. I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself."

"Much better," applauded Emily.

While Walt had been experiencing his moment of the terrible doubt of appearances, Madame Selavy had been circuitously approaching the newest child. Now, kneeling beside him, she spoke with saccharine sweetness.

"Tell us your name, petite bébé."

"My name is Ezra –"

Madame Selavy now shrieked, "Listen, Ezra, you devil! You're going to damn well get us out of this hell, or I'll kill you again myself!"

The seeress clamped her hands around the child's throat –

And froze, as if pinned by Galvanic forces.

From Ezra's mouth emerged Madame's voice, clear as a Unitarian church bell.

"My name is Maude Frickett. I was born to an unmarried fishmonger in Fulton Market, New York. At age seven I was orphaned, and forced to live on the streets, taking shelter at night on a barge in the East River. At age ten, I was raped by sailors. At age thirteen, I became a prostitute. By fifteen, I had added picking pockets and serving gin to my skills. I put

away money enough to open my own brothel by age twenty. When the police shut me down, I changed careers. I set up in Albany as a medium. That's where Andy found me. He thinks he's using me, but it's the other way 'round. Nobody uses old Maude! Nobody's smart enough. They're all marks, everyone, just fit for plucking –"

With an enormous effort, Madame Selavy yanked her hands away from the child, breaking the flow of secret speech. For a second or two, she remained kneeling. Then her eyes rolled back in their sockets and she collapsed in a swoon.

**D**avis rushed to aid the stricken seeress, as did the others shortly thereafter. The children, meantime, calmly took charge of Ezra, who had likewise lost consciousness.

After Madame's unmoving form had been laid out comfortably among the tethered ostriches, Crookes voiced their common realization.

"A form of thought transference –"

Walt put it more poetically. "There was a child went forth, and the first object he looked upon, he became..."

Davis objected. "Surely you don't believe that the nonsensical biography the child spouted pertains to Madame Selavy? It was plainly a case of a stray psychic broadcast from an errant soul, registering itself on the conjoined minds of Hrose and Ezra..."

Austin shattered Davis's defence. "Come off it, Davis. Even if you are truly blind to the woman's deceptions, you cannot expect us to continue so. You and Maude – as we should now refer to her – have been wrong about everything connected with this place. And don't forget the time I found you compounding your 'ideoplasm' in my kitchen! God, what a fool I was to accept your jejune excuses! My grief must have made me mad and blind!"

Davis broke down. "It's true! God help me, it's true. The ideoplasm is only raw cotton soaked in various salts and minerals which somehow glow. But there was never any intention of real deceit. Maude has a genuine talent, whatever her origins. We just wanted to help people deal with their sadness. We took only enough money to sustain us in a modicum of comfort –"

Crookes was cupping his chin thoughtfully. "We must attempt to quantify your ideoplastic recipe, Mister Davis. It would put our whole transdimensional expedition on a more scientific footing..."

"Interesting as these confessions are," interjected Walt, "and good as it is to unburden the conscience, they have little relevance to our plight. It appears that there will be no further developments until little Ezra awakes. May I suggest that we use this interval to get some rest? One of us should watch the children –"

"I volunteer," said Davis.

"I will watch with you," said Austin. "I don't care to be deceived or tricked again."

"Mister Dickinson, I assure you –"

"Please, spare me. Let us start our vigil."

The two moved off to within a few yards of the patiently waiting children, who were clustered around their recumbent comrade. Quickly, the remaining humans erected the three tents.

"I shall maintain a close eye on Maude," said Crookes, once the still-unconscious woman had been

placed under his direction in his own tent. "I have some small medical knowledge, and should be able to minister to her. I am sure Miss Dickinson would appreciate not having to share her quarters with such a patient."

Under this new arrangement, all retired.

Emily was restless. Try as she would, she could not summon sleep. What would happen when Ezra awoke? How had the charade conducted by Davis and Maude turned into grim reality? Would any of them ever see home again, or would they all die here, trailing off into madness first?

With these thoughts and more bedeviling her, Emily resolved to seek Walt's comfort and guidance.

She arose from her pallet and left her tent.

At the closed entrance to the tent shared by Walt and Sutton, Emily hesitated.

A husky whispered voice filtered out.

"O camerado close! O you and me at last, and us two only. With my arms draped around you, I am satisfied. What? Is this then a touch quivering me to a new identity? Flames and ether make a rush for my veins! The treacherous tip of me reaches out to help them. Unbuttoning my clothes, holding me by the bare waist, behaving licentious toward me, taking no denial, immodestly sliding my senses away! The udder of my heart drips sweet milk! Part the shirt from my bosom-bone! Settle your head athwart my hips, and gently turn over upon me!"

Henry Sutton laughed, and replied, "Ya talk so funny, old man! But I loves yer anyhow."

Then all speech ceased.

Emily stumbled backwards, an arm raised across her face.

No, it could not be – She must be mistaken.

From the tent came the unmistakable noises of pleasure Emily remembered from the night of her surrender to Walt.

A queerly disturbing image from her schooldays surfaced: an ancient Greek statue of two naked Olympian wrestlers, ecstatic sinewy limbs intertwined –

To learn the Transport by the Pain, as *Blind Men* learn the sun! This is the Sovereign Anguish! This – the signal woe!

Tears obscuring her vision, Emily fled to her last refuge.

Throwing back the canvas door of Crookes's tent, she was on the verge of spilling her distress when the disorderly scene within registered on her senses.

The pretend seeress seemed partially conscious, like a lazy sleeper fighting Morpheus, or a languorous debauchee. Her upper garments were pooled about her waist, exposing her generous endowments – quite normal in appearance, no leakage of ideoplasm evident.

These attractions Crookes was slowly caressing, no resistance forthcoming.

"Imagine – a common trull. Yes, you shall not refuse me –"

Emily choked on an ocean of bile. Gagging, she fell back. She wanted to scream, but it was as if an invisible membrane had been stretched across her face, keeping all the horror inside.

Was it her mind that was coming unhinged, or those of the others?

At that moment, her brother's shout rang out.

"Quickly! The child awakes!"

Emily staggered blindly toward Austin's voice. If there had been so much as a pebble in her path, she would not have made it. But the grass offered no obstacle, and somehow she reached her brother's side, falling into his arms.

"Emily, what's wrong –?"

Love's stricken "Why?" that breaks the hugest hearts was all she could speak.

Before Austin could query further, the trio was joined by the other four.

Crookes was half-supporting a hazy Maude, one of whose breasts was still exposed. Walt and Sutton wore only their long buttoned undershirts, which luckily hung to their thighs.

"Allen," called out Walt. "What is happening?"

The children had formed a circle. Within, the air seemed shimmery, as around the Thanotopsis's ideoplastic tubes.

"Now that we are whole, we are going to the sea," replied the child.

"Take us with you!"

There was a moment of silence, as if the children were communicating. Then: "Very well. Enter the circle."

Breaking hands with one partner, Allen made a gap.

Slowly, knowing they had no choice, the humans shuffled within.

Emily thought about hanging back, letting the others go, so she could die alone in her misery. But at the last second, she found her feet moving in synchronization with the others.

The circle was reformed.

The air around the humans seemed to thrill and vibrate. Emily thought, There is a morn by men unseen, where children upon remoter green, keep their Seraphic May. And all day long, with dance and game, and gambol I may never name, they employ their holiday. Ne'er saw I such a wondrous scene. ne'er such a ring on such a green –

There came now a hum felt only in the bones –

**H**umans and children stood on the seashore. Yet it was not a shore of sand. A vast tongue of water lapped a gently sloping bank of grass.

And the water itself was green as a spring apple, and unrippled as a silken shroud upon a corpse.

The instant transition left Emily stupefied, and the others plainly also. Too much had happened too fast. Her limbs went to jelly, and she dropped down on the turf.

The children separated into a line, facing the ocean. Allen turned to Walt. "Goodbye, father."

The reborn souls began to walk into the sea. The slope must have been precipitous. Only a yard from the shore, they were submerged up to their chins.

A step more, and the water closed around their heads.

They were gone.

The humans' last hope for escape had disappeared... Emily felt someone brush past her.

It was Maude. Like a sleepwalker, drawn perhaps by the remnants of her intense connection with Ezra, or by simple desperation, the seeress was heading for the sea.

Before anyone could stop her, she had entered the

water. Two steps only, and it was up to her waist, lifting her dress around her like a jellyfish's mantle.

Davis began to rush forward to rescue his partner, but was stopped by Crookes' decisive restraint.

"No, don't! Can't you see what's happening, man? She's not sinking – she's dissolving!"

It was true. Standing only where the shorter children had gone under, Maude should not have been so swamped. Indeed, she had stopped moving, yet the water was still crawling up her! Inexorably it swallowed her, as the horrified onlookers watched. Exhibiting no pain, but rather a transcendental bliss, the woman melted into the ocean's embrace, till only her empty clothing was left floating on the placid sea.

Davis wailed, "Maude!" then collapsed.

Emily had passed all bounds of shock. Betrayed, bedazzled, bereft, her mind was now working in some kind of cool and rarefied zone, like a little bird carried by a storm into the highest reaches of the atmosphere finding it could somehow still breathe and fly.

Emily giggled softly to herself, hysteria bubbling under.

*I started early – Taak my Friends –  
And visited the Sea –  
The Mermaids in the Basement  
Came out to laak at me –*

*But na Man maved Me – till the Tide  
Went past my simple Shae –  
And past my Apran – and my Belt  
And past my Badice – taa –*

*And made as He wauld eat me up –  
As whally as a Dew –*

Coincidental with the intrusion of Maude into the greedy sea, there now came a deep rumbling noise from the plain behind them, as if in response.

Austin helped Emily up, and Crookes aided Davis. Together, the six climbed the slope until they had gained the graminiferous flatland.

There was a green Mountain breaking the tableland now in the middle distance. Its magnitude obscured for a moment the fact that it possessed a familiar human profile.

Then the Mountain rose from the waist.

Only Walt dared speak. "We seemed to have awoken someone –"

For a moment, the Mountain sat upon the Plain in its tremendous Chair, its observation omnifold, its insight everywhere –

At last it saw the humans.

The Mountain got to its feet and began to walk.

In no time it was towering over the expedition, casting a cold shadow across them.

The Mountain, observed Emily, was a hermaphrodite. Divided down the middle, its left half was naked Emily, its right half naked Walt.

Beard and breast, split genitals – was this then their own magnificent reborn soul, somehow conjoined for eternity? Or was it rather a convenient guise for something beyond their comprehension?

Emily felt a curious wisdom emanate from the gigantic being. It seemed to sense why they were here, seemed to grasp their whole lives from start to unseen finish, much as a person might comprehend the

entirety of a mayfly's short existence.

And from the Mountain radiated pity.

Then the giant reached for them, with a hand as huge and green as Amherst's town common –

**T**here was a roaring in Emily's ears, as of the sea. Something was clamped on her face. Where was she? What had happened?

She scrambled at the impediment to her breathing, succeeded in clanking it off.

It was a gas mask.

Emily got weakly to her feet.

She was aboard the *Thanotopsis*, which vessel still sat on its cradle in the midst of the grassy town lawn, its bow still dripping with champagne. Above stretched the welcome blue sky, and a sun at normal noon-time height. The familiar buildings of the town bulked reassuringly around them. From the hold came the muted cries of the ostriches.

The louder noise was that of the crowd who had come to watch them depart. Now their cheers were turning ugly.

"Start the show!" "When's the sailing?" "I seen 'em shiver like, but then they came back!" "Hoist yer sails, lubber!" "Where's the ghostly gale?" "Show us some skeletons!" "Heaven or bust!"

Emily's shipmates were now off their couches. All seemed as dazed and bewildered as she herself felt.

"Of the dead, I dreamed," said Walt. "Passing strange it was – yet even now it fades, fades, fades..."

Crookes said, "I too half-recall an adventure almost beyond words. Was it the ether only, or was it...?"

"Did I get to hold my babes?" asked Austin. "Someone, tell me, please! I don't think I can go back to Sue without knowing –"

"Where is Madame Selavy?" Davis asked with some urgency.

Emily noticed now that the medium was indeed missing.

Davis rushed to the ship's side and addressed the crowd. "Did anyone see a woman leave the ship? Speak up, for God's sake!"

"Not me." "She musta jumped ship if she ain't there." "I think I seen her go overboard." "Say, now that you mention it –" "Yeah, I seen her hoist her skirts and run off." "She couldn't take the failure –"

Davis returned, massaging his brow wearily. "It does not seem possible that Hrose would have fled. But the alternative – I can't quite envision it, but it's something too horrible to contemplate. Perhaps I will find her back at The Evergreens..."

Austin said stiffly, "I fear you will not be welcome there long, Mister Davis, nor will Madame. This whole affair has proven an expensive and embarrassing fiasco. If you will be so kind as to pack your belongings, I shall be happy to pay for your ticket back to Poughkeepsie."

"And I too shall be leaving," said Crookes. "This fruitless sidetrack off the road of science has lasted too long. My laboratory beckons."

"Henry and I also shall be going," said Walt. "Manahatta's million-footed streets call." The burly poet draped an arm around his young companion, who smiled with animal amiability, as if he had simply been for a walk around the block. Then Walt turned to Emily.

"Would you consider accompanying us to New York, Miss Dickinson? Although I cannot guarantee you an easy entrée to literary society, you might find the writerly company at Pfaff's Saloon congenial. And, with a little luck, it might very well lead to the publication of your poetry..."

Here was the invitation she had lived long years for, uttered by the man who had shown her the most respect and admiration.

So why was a wave of repugnance engulfing her?

Something she had learned, something about Walt and young Sutton –

No, it was gone. The cause was invisible, but the sharp-edged feeling of distaste remained.

Emily spoke coldly. "I fear my sensibilities would not permit my easy entrance into the circles you frequent, Mister Whitman."

Walt smiled sadly. "As you wish, *ma femme*."

She almost relented then. But her rock-ribbed New England soul could not burst its straps of iron.

The men dropped the gangplank, and the travellers descended. Halfway down, Emily spied Vinnie waiting for her, and waved.

As Emily's foot touched the grass, a sudden vision overwhelmed her, full, broad and comprehensive.

She saw her future days in their entirety. Years going by with no male company other than The Squire and Austin. Keeping more and more to her room. Tending her garden, tending her parents as they began to decline in health. Writing letters, writing poems. Vinnie somehow staying with her, growing bitter and convoluted. Her own eventual death, her corpse carried out the back door and across the fields –

And the rebirth she dreamed of?

An image of a green sea rose from somewhere. It was strangely comforting.

Sad and lonely those years would be, stretching long and cold, yet not lacking a certain icy glory...

This trip, however abortive, had been the turning point. Now there was no going back.

What if she had truly spurned Whitman and his beguilements, when he had first serenaded her below her window? Snubbed him utterly, instead of chasing after him? Would it have made her future easier to bear?

No. She could have done nothing different.

But the cost of the knowledge of who she was seemed rather steep –

For each ecstatic instant  
We must an anguish pay  
In keen and quivering ratio  
To the ecstasy.

For each beloved hour  
Sharp pinnacles of years –  
Bitter contested farthings –  
And coffers heaped with Tears!

**Paul Di Filippo**, as we stated last issue, lives in Providence, Rhode Island (once the home of H.P. Lovecraft!), and has been building a reputation as one of America's most unpredictable sf/fantasy short-story writers for more than a decade. He is a former bookseller.

## MILLION

### Some back-issue highlights:

**No.1:** James Ellroy interview (Paul McAuley); Kim Newman on gangsters; Stan Nicholls, Brian Stableford, Mark Morris & many others

**No.2:** Kurt Vonnegut interview (Colin Greenland); Joan Aiken, Sherlock Holmes, P.C. Wren; plus Wendy Bradley, Nick Lowe

**No.3:** Anne McCaffrey interview; Angus Wells, Fu Manchui; Stableford on Rider Haggard; plus John Christopher, Dave Langford & others

**No.4:** Ellis Peters interview (Mike Ashley); Andy Sawyer on Virginia Andrews; Stableford on James Hadley Chase; plus Langford, Byrne, & much more

**No.5:** Terry Pratchett, J.G. Ballard, Anne Rice & David Morrell interviews; Stableford on ERB (this is the same as *Interzone* no.51)

**No.6:** Dorothy Dunnott interview (Lisa Tuttle); Mary Higgins Clark, Thomas Harris; Stableford on Robinson Crusoe's children

**No.7:** Campbell Armstrong, Hammond Innes & Norman Mailer interviews; Mike Ashley on the Strand magazine; Stableford on Hank Janson

**No.8:** Stephen Gallagher & John Harvey interviews; Sawyer on "slaver" novels; Stableford on Hammett & Chandler; much more

**No.9:** Geoff Ryman interview (Newman); Doc Savage; historical mysteries; sequels & prequels; Hollywood novels; etc, etc.

**No.10:** Peter Lovesey on Leslie Charteris; Andrew Vachss & Jonathan Kellerman interviews; Elvis Presley; Rex Stout

**No.11:** Garry Kilworth on animal fantasy; Michael Crichton, James Herbert, Peter Tremayne; Andrews on Richard S. Prather

**No.12:** S.T. Joshi on Robert Aickman; series characters, Fay Weldon, Robert Graves, Rupert Bear; Langford, Nick Austin & many more

**No.13:** Clive Barker interview (Nicholls); Newman on Dracula; Joshi on Stephen King; Stableford on Shangri-La; Bradbury comics

**No.14:** Patricia Kennealy interview; Jack the Ripper, John D. MacDonald, Dorothy Sayers; Ian R. MacLeod on Gerald Seymour; & much more

All available from *Interzone* – see page 3.

# Yesterday's Bestsellers, 17: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

by Brian Aldiss

**F**rankenstein is one of those literary characters whose names have entered common parlance; everyone recognizes the name and everyone uses it. The recognition and the usage are often slightly uncertain – most people know it from the film versions, which are significantly different from the book, and some people have to be reminded that the name is that of the scientist, not the monster that the scientist made – but this uncertainty is not entirely inappropriate to a work whose implication and significance are rather problematic.

The popularity of *Frankenstein* both as a literary classic and as a fuzzy set of ideas bears testimony to the remarkable vividness of Mary Shelley's vision, but it also reflects the protean quality of its central motifs, which can be interpreted in several different ways so as to carry several different messages.

The most common modern view of the story – aided and perhaps sustained by Boris Karloff's remarkable performance in the 1931 film version and its sequels – is that it is an account of the way in which "monstrosity" arises, involving diseased brains, inadequate control over one's actions and resentment against the unthinking horror with which most people react to ugliness. The most common view based on the book alone sees it as an allegory in which a scientist is rightly punished for daring to usurp the divine prerogative of creation. A closely-related interpretation regards Victor Frankenstein as an archetypal example of a man destroyed by his own creation; in this view the story becomes a central myth of the kind of technophobia which argues that modern man is indeed doomed to be destroyed by his own artefacts (and that such a fate, however tragic, is not undeserved).

There are, of course, more convoluted interpretations of the text to be found in the voluminous academic literature dealing with the story. Among the most widely-cited are accounts which see the story as a kind of proto-feminist parable about the male usurpation of the female prerogative of reproduction, and accounts which see

it as an allegory of the evolving relationship between the ancien régime (*Frankenstein* is a hereditary peer) and the emergent industrial working class.

So far as can be ascertained, Mary Shelley does not appear to have had any of these theses in mind when she wrote the book, but champions of these various meanings are usually content to interpret them as the result of a coincidence of inspirational forces in which the author's role was that of semi-conscious instrument. Support is lent to this view by the fact that Mary Shelley was only 19 years old when she completed *Frankenstein* and by the fact that all her other books – with the partial exception of the majestically lachrymose jeremiad *The Lost Man* (1826) – failed to excite the contemporary audience and are now rarely read or studied. However, the fact remains that *Frankenstein* is one of the most powerful stories produced in the course of the last two centuries and that it has better claims than any other to have become a "modern myth" (whatever one understands by that phrase).

**F**rankenstein is often called a Gothic novel, on the grounds that the popular horror stories of its day mostly shared a set of characteristics which justified that label, but it ought not to be thus classified. Despite certain similarities of method and tone, its subject matter is very different from that of the classic Gothic novels. These include Horace Walpole's definitive *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) and Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wonderer* (1820), all of which involve sinister ancient edifices, evil conspiracies, hideous apparitions (invariably interpreted as supernatural, though sometimes ultimately rationalized), the threat of sexual violation, and intimations of incest. The pretence that *Frankenstein* belongs to the Gothic sub-genre serves mainly to obscure the remarkable originality of its own subject-matter, which is much broader and much more forward-looking.

*Frankenstein* is a book which begins

to explore imaginative territory into which no previous author had penetrated (although that was not its initial purpose). It is more aptly discussed as a pioneering work of science fiction, albeit one that was written half a century before its time. It is entirely appropriate that Brian Aldiss should have worked so hard to establish the book as the foundation-stone of the modern genre of science fiction. On the other hand, given the nature of the most common interpretations of the text it is by no means surprising that Isaac Asimov should have felt that the technophilic optimism of his own work – which was, of course, central to the historical development of genre science fiction – was framed in opposition to the "Frankenstein syndrome." To Asimov, the central myth of *Frankenstein* seemed to be an ideative monster, which must be slain by heroic and sinless robots for the benefit of future generations.

Ambivalent attitudes to science are not particularly unusual in works of speculative fiction. A great deal of the fiction nowadays categorized as science fiction is horrific, some of it born of the fear or hatred of science, and it would not necessarily be inappropriate to trace the genre back to a science-hating ancestor. In the particular case of *Frankenstein*, however, the matter is rather more problematic. Mary Shelley was certainly not the kind of person who might be expected to produce an anti-scientific parable, and one suspects that she might have been rather distressed to discover that so many readers interpret her work in that way, although it must be admitted that she did little to discourage such an interpretation. If, however, one assumes that she had no such intention, there remains the problem of explaining how and why the book turned out to have such a semblance at all.

The full title which Mary Shelley gave the novel is *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. In attempting to assess the significance of this choice it is necessary to bear in mind her beloved husband's fascination with the character of Prometheus. To a devout atheist like Percy Shelley, Prometheus was a great hero whose condemnation to be

chained to a rock throughout eternity while eagles came daily to devour his perpetually-regenerated liver was firm proof of the horrid unreasonableness and downright wickedness of godly tyrants. Shelley knew quite well that the atheism he proclaimed so loudly and the free love which he and Mary preached and practised so brazenly were – in the eyes of his enemies – tantamount to Satanism but like Blake before him he was fully prepared to champion Satan himself, let alone the safely-obsolete Prometheus, as a revolutionary light-bearer unjustly slandered and condemned by a monstrous God. To Percy Shelley – and to Mary too, at least while Percy lived – no modern Prometheus could possibly be reckoned a villain, and any terrible fate a modern Prometheus might meet must be reckoned as a tragedy, not an exercise of any kind of justice, divine or otherwise.

Given all this, it is unlikely in the extreme that a book which Mary Shelley elected to call *The Modern Prometheus* was planned as an assault on the hubris of scientists, or as a defence of divine prerogative. It is true that Mary Shelley added a new introduction to the revised edition of the book issued in 1831, in which she seemed not unsympathetic to the demonization of Frankenstein (and also to the notion that she had been a mere instrument of creative forces for whose produce she was not to be held responsible) but this was nine years after Percy Shelley's death – which circumstance had forced her to compromise and make her peace with all the tyrannies of convention that he was able to despise and defy quite openly. (In those times even the most determinedly heroic woman had far less leeway than a man.) Even if the 1831 introduction can be reckoned sincere – and it almost certainly cannot – it must be reckoned the work of a person who bears much the same relation to the author of *Frankenstein* as the humbled Napoleon who came back from Moscow bore to the all-conquering hero who had set out.

The fact remains, however, that whether Frankenstein's fate was intended to be an awful warning to scientists or not, it certainly looks that way. How could this have come about?

The novel begins with a series of letters written by the explorer Robert Walton, who has been trying to navigate his ship through the Arctic ice in the hope of finding a warm continent beyond it, akin to the legendary Hyperborea. Modern readers know full well that this was a fool's errand, but that was not at all certain in 1818. Thus, although Walton's situation is clearly symbolic – one of the Gothic conventions which Frankenstein does adopt is that the weather is symbolic of

human emotion, so his entrapment in the ice signifies that Walton's noble ambitions have unfortunately alienated him from the warmth of human companionship – it should not be taken for granted that Mary Shelley saw him as a lunatic who should have known better. Nor should we assume that Walton's encounter with Victor Frankenstein, who is similarly lost in the ice-field and in whom Walton recognizes a kindred spirit, was in her eyes a meeting of damned men.

Victor's story is essentially that of a man who once had "everything" but lost what he had through desiring even more. The "everything" which he had includes material goods, but its most precious aspects are friendship and love, embodied in his relationships with Henry Clerval and his cousin Elizabeth. His ambitions become inflated when he leaves home for university, where he becomes enamoured of the grandiose dreams of Renaissance magicians like Paracelsus and Cornelius Agrippa. One of his teachers dismisses this fascination with frank contempt but another points out that modern scientists are beginning to achieve results even more marvellous than those which the optimists and charlatans of earlier eras had claimed. Victor then turns his attention to science – specifically to the science of electricity, the "vital fluid" whose implication in the mechanics of muscular movement had recently been demonstrated – as a possible means of achieving an unprecedented victory over the greatest of all tyrants: death.

(It is worth noting here that Mary Shelley, even at the tender age of 19, had good cause to be preoccupied with the oppressions of this particular tyrant. Her mother's glittering intellectual career had been cut short when she died shortly after bearing Mary, and Mary's first child by Shelley had already died before the fateful night at the Villa Diodati which set in train the sequence of events which ultimately led to the writing of *Frankenstein*. The death of Shelley's first wife Harriet – who drowned, probably by suicidal design, while Mary was engaged in the writing of the book – freed Shelley so that he and Mary could marry. This last episode presumably added an uncomfortably guilty ambivalence to her preoccupation with mortality.)

While Victor is completing his experiments in resurrection he becomes withdrawn and intellectually isolated, no longer able to find any joy in social intercourse. This process reaches a frightful climax when the work is finally complete; the patchwork man which he has made has only to open a cold eye for Victor to be suddenly overcome by repulsion at what he has made. When the monster departs in confusion, Victor gladly reverts to type, renewing his relation-

ships with his friend and his family – who gratefully nurse him back to health when he falls terribly ill.

One of the more ingenious academic interpretations of the plot suggests that from this point onwards much if not all of what happens is a hallucination of Victor's and that the monster which subsequently appears to him is a projection of his own personality, his own doppelgänger. Although this is superficially the most bizarre of the academic reinterpretations, its adherents rightly point out that it does make rather more sense than the a literal interpretation of the puzzling events which follow. When Victor's young brother is murdered Victor becomes afraid – and later becomes quite certain – that the monster is the murderer, and yet he does not say a word to prevent the wrongful conviction of an entirely innocent servant. The immorality of this inaction is so striking as to have convinced some readers that Victor himself must be the true murderer, and that his subsequent account of the monster's activities, like his failure to speak up for the servant, is a pathological denial of his own guilt. Although this interpretation is certainly overingenious as an account of the author's intentions, and does not sit well with the conclusion of the story, it must be admitted that the monster's story is hardly more credible and that the monster's explanation of his own motivation is, in its way, every bit as peculiar.

The monster tells Victor that he too has craved the fellowship and love which provided a safe refuge for the sick scientist, but that it was denied him absolutely. He was rejected by his creator at the moment of his first awakening, and was subsequently reviled by everyone who caught sight of him; even his desperate attempt to make a home with a blind man has inevitably come to nothing. It was, he claims, the madness born of this rejection which led him to kidnap a child, and the revelation that the child was the brother of his creator that drove him to murderous frenzy. In consequence of all this the monster demands that a companion be made for him, given that he is too repulsive to be accepted into the community of men.

Victor initially agrees to this request, and sets out to accomplish it on a remote islet in the Orkneys, but he is no longer insulated by obsession, and becomes terrified of the thought that he is giving birth to an entire race of monsters whose co-existence with mankind will be – to say the least – problematic. This prospect causes him to abandon the work, and no immediate repercussions ensue. In time, though, the monster sets out to exact his revenge, not upon Victor himself but upon his friends and loved ones. First Clerval is murdered (Victor is

charged with the crime but acquitted) and then, on her wedding-night, Elizabeth. Isolated once again, Victor has little difficulty recovering the motive force of obsession, but this time his obsession is to rid the world of his creation. He looks to Walton for aid, but when he learns that Walton has already turned back from his own quest and is heading out of the ice-field he realizes that he cannot carry through his purpose. He dies.

The final confrontation with the monster is left to Walton, who finds Victor's adversary confused, agonized and contrite. One of the few books the monster has had the opportunity to read since he learned the uses of language by secretly observing a family at work and play is Goethe's Romantic classic *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which waxes lyrical about the appropriateness of suicide as a solution for those bereft of any meaningful connection with their fellows, and it is hardly surprising that the monster chooses to continue into the wilderness of the Arctic ice.

"I am content to suffer alone while my sufferings shall endure," the monster says regretfully, "when I die, I am well satisfied that abhorrence and opprobrium should load my memory." He could not possibly have guessed how prophetic these words would prove to be.

We are nowadays familiar with the circumstances of Frankenstein's genesis, on the stormy night on which Lord Byron, Percy and Mary Shelley, Claire Clairmont and Dr Polidori amused themselves at the Villa Diodati by reading tales from a volume entitled *Fontomagoriono*, which consisted of horror stories translated from German into French. They subsequently agreed that each of them would write a horrific tale of his or her own, although Polidori was the only one apart from Mary to produce anything substantial.

The significance of this fact to an understanding of the construction of Frankenstein is that the story grew from the particular visionary seed – a fragment of an actual nightmare, if Mary's later claim is to be believed – of the creator's first confrontation with his creation. Mary did not begin at the beginning but in the middle, and both the beginning and the end are extrapolations of that single instant, the one constructed in order to explain how it came about and the other to follow it to its implicit conclusion. Both are consistent, to a degree, with the visionary moment, but they are not really consistent with one another, in the way that they would have been had the author extrapolated an ending from the apparent premises contained in the beginning. That the story was to be horrific was accepted as an axiom, and much

of what was eventually presented as the logic of the story – the "explanation" of how this crucial confrontation came to take place – was formed by way of ideative apology, not as a set of propositions to be examined on their own merits.

Given this, it is perhaps not entirely surprising that the logical patchwork which leads up to the true point of origination is somewhat ill-fitting. Had the author actually started to make up a story about a "modern Prometheus" she would surely have come up with something very different; that first awakening of the resurrected man might – and perhaps would – have been a joyous and triumphant affair had it not been already set in place as the horrific *raison d'être* of the whole exercise. Alas for the modern Prometheus, his endeavour was damned before he was even thought of, let alone characterized. The reason Mary made poor Victor Frankenstein a scientist had nothing to do with a desire to comment on science as an endeavour, but was simply the result of wanting to do something different from the Gothic novels of supernatural horror which had already become tedious and passé.

"I am by no means indifferent to the manner in which whatever moral tendencies exist in the sentiments or characters it contains shall affect the reader," Mary Shelley wrote in the preface to the first edition, "yet my chief concern in this respect has been limited to avoiding the enervating effects of the novels of the present day and to the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue." She further insists that "the opinions which naturally spring from the character and situation of the hero are by no means to be conceived as existing always in my own conviction; nor is any inference justly to be drawn from the following pages as prejudicing any philosophical doctrine of whatever kind."

There is certainly some self-protective rationalization here – the author is shrewdly anticipating and trying cleverly to deflect the charge that the book promotes atheism – but she is not trying nearly so hard to do that as she was later to attempt in the 1831 introduction, and it must be noted that "any philosophical doctrine whatsoever" includes science as well as religion.

If the build-up to the moment of confrontation between creator and creation is a fairly haphazard rationalization, then so is the subsequent unfolding of that horrific moment. What happens in the remainder of the novel makes little sense – rationally or morally – precisely because the horror of that moment can never be undermined or reduced, and thus can never undergo any kind of transformation no matter

how hard the unfortunate monster tries to find a solution. The machinery of the plot remains totally subordinate to that instant of revulsion, and revulsion remains the inescapable condition of the key characters, no matter how they may regret it. Victor and the monster are sealed within it and united by it, all possible avenues of escape being ruled out by the fact that this is, essentially and definitively, a horror story. It is only to be expected that the narrative expansion of the crucial moment should seem to some readers to be akin to a hallucination – especially to the kind of hallucination which allegedly packs a lifetime into the space of a single incident.

Thus, while the long prelude which precedes and sets up the visionary moment invents – more-or-less by accident – the modern genre of science fiction, the long coda which follows and expands upon it constitutes – again more-or-less by accident – a giant leap for the not-so-modern genre of delusional fantasy which had recently been invented by E.T.A. Hoffmann. This double triumph assured that the book would become a landmark in the evolution of modern imaginative fiction as well as a popular success. It is a landmark, because of rather than in spite of its inherent internal contradictions – because of its struggle to be something other than it is. It is a great book precisely because its author could not and would not settle for writing an ordinary book, which would hang together by reproducing some familiar pattern of clichés.

It would, of course, be foolish to regret that Frankenstein is the kind of book it is, or to wish that Mary Shelley had written another book instead. Life being what it is, we have to be grateful for whatever we have, and Frankenstein-the-novel is a book well worth having even if Frankenstein-the-myth is a nest of viperish ideas we could well do without. Given, however, that Frankenstein is a pioneering work of science fiction it might be appropriate to wonder what Mary Shelley – doubtless with Percy's active encouragement and assistance – might have achieved had she decided, once the beginning of the story had been written, to cease taking it for granted that what she was writing was a horror story and cast aside the nightmarish seed. So let us, briefly, wonder...

What if the scientific miracle that Victor Frankenstein had wrought had been allowed to be a miracle indeed, and the resurrected man no monster at all? What if Victor, and Mary, had been allowed to proclaim that the Promethean man of science would indeed be the greatest benefactor imaginable, and that there are no divine prerogatives

Concluded on page 68

# Canon at the End of Time

## John Clute

I'm trying to call it something, this new novel by Robert Holdstock, and I'm not getting very far. My need comes from a sense that *The Hollowing* (HarperCollins, £15.99), which is a sequel to *Mythago Wood* (1984) and *Lavondyss* (1988), makes up part of a new instauration of fantasy. There's a word for you. "Instauration" – it means an action of restoring, renovation, renewal, founding – could almost be the term I'm looking for. So: Instauration Fantasy: a late 20th-century tale in which the contemporary world is transfigured and/or restored through the metamorphic intersection of normal reality and the various realities characteristic of deep fantasy worlds; characterized by an acute attention to the invasive and sometimes death-invoking potency of the metamorph world, by genre-crossing plots which tend to evoke a plethora of themes and icons, by a powerful tendency to mix time future, time present and time past, by plot structures which serve as conscious enactments of a deep Story which must be told, by an obsession with Portals, and by the almost constant presence of Visitors from Other Tales. But Instauration Fantasy is a term without a ring to it, and would anyway have to be explained every time it was invoked.

Holdstock isn't the only one to write them, of course. Other books I'd like to call something – but I seek for a theme in vain – include John Crowley's *Little, Big* (1981), Stuart Gordon's "Watchers" trilogy, Paul Hazel's "Finn" trilogy, Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale* (1983), Sheri S. Tepper's *Beauty* (1991) and *A Plague of Angels* (1993), and Michael Swanwick's *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* (1993), for starters. They make up a sort of canon at the end of time: because they share a complex, elegiac sense that the world and its genres are perhaps best to be seen, through dark glasses, from beyond the secular cacophony of historical time. When they're done badly – none in that list is one of the bad ones – they can read like *Coupon Fantasies* with St Vitus' Dance; seamy congeries of elves and dwarves driving wodewose Chevrolets through portals in the neighbourhood Mall and squabbling with bands of valiant pre-teens (our heroes and heroines, some of them with divorced parents) over *Lebensraum* in Ohio. But anything can be done badly; there is nothing sacred; etc. The secret of the successful Instauration Fantasy – or at any rate one central sign that we are about to embark upon one – is that it is almost always difficult. It reads like a Knot which must be untied, a Knot originally woven by an obsessed maker. Holdstock is one of these.

It cannot be pretended that, third time round in *Ryhope Wood*, he has managed in *The Hollowing* to recreate

the full metamorphic store of the two earlier books, nor that there aren't occasional points in the current tale where the unconscious humour of the first two – the sense that the obsessed maker of the tale was so engrossed in his Ancient Mariner pigeonholing that he simply didn't know when he was waving his hands in the air with his pants down – hasn't slid into a very slightly shuffling routine vaudeville: Ben Elton doing good Wodehouse. But this is the almost inevitable cost of becoming accustomed, and there are very few moments when one senses Holdstock deliberately allowing himself to coast down runnels into the heartwood.

The story is the story Holdstock tells best, and tells most often: The tale of the Lost Child searching for its Parent, or whose parent is searching for it. The most heartstopping moments in any Holdstock novel are those when, through the labyrinth of time and metamorphic root, a parent almost manages to touch a child, or vice versa. In this novel, a substitute father (George Huxley from *Mythago Wood*) is almost touched by a substitute son (Lytton from this book); Jim Keeton comes fairly close to almost touching Tallis Keeton (both from *Lavondyss*); and the protagonist of *The Hollowing* – who is the father of the lost boy whose damaged brain generates a web of feral mythagoes and whose longing self impermeates *Ryhope* so that the Wood bears the countenance of the lost child – is surrounded by his son, breathes his son in, haunts and is haunted by his son, and finds his son at last. Because it is a successful culmination (*The Fetch*, which this reviewer discussed in *Interzone* 55, moves more tentatively to a similar climax), the matter of *Ryhope* may have lost its enabling plot. There may be no fourth book, no further re-enactment of the human dance of longing round the briar, the Mask Tree at the heart of the vortex.

Around this story which Holdstock tells best, there is something of a clatter of event. The father, Richard Bradley, having lost his son (to what one might, almost viciously, call a bit of sonspot activity which burns the boy's secular body to a husk and hauls his essence into the heat), is enlisted by a

cadre of *Ryhope Wood* Investigators: a giant Frenchman; an Amerindian woman in search of Coyote; some Finns; the obsessed Lytton; and so forth. It sounds a bit Dirty Dozen, and it is. There is quite a bit of horseplay and stuff, and a couple of life-affirming reunions, and Bradley and the woman, whose name is Helen, fall in love. Their eventual coupling in the heart of the wood, on the other hand, is genuinely hilarious, very sexy, and makes the reader want to see them live. One formally detachable episode – the long sequence featuring Jason and the Argonauts – is in fact a tour de force of seemingly easeful but in fact extremely sophisticated fabulating. The son has entwined himself very deep into the legend of Gawain and the Green Knight, which means that *Ryhope Wood* begins to generate warped transformations out of the Arthurian Matter; and in Holdstock's version of the tale the identity of Gawain comes as a salutary shock. The "hollowings" of the title are perhaps a touch *Coupon*-like, a bit French-Farce: they are sort of wormholes through time (*Ryhope* is bigger inside than out along a horizontal axis, and versions of the Wood are also strung through time like palimpsests spiked through the world tree), and they can be all-too-easily mapped. Some of the plot ricochets which take the book above 300 pages can be laid down to the excessive ease with which hollowings can be used to engulf and debouch characters when necessary.

Again and again, in other words, the risible swells for a moment, and again and again the patent obsessive and lavishing seriousness of the author heals the scene; and tells us that, after the plot dross burns off, the heart-residue of his book constitutes a calling of the world to order, a submitting of the world – and of the mortals who inhabit it – to the harrowing of Instauration. To the face of Change. To the Story which tells the tale of those who tell the Story: our only Orient in these latter days of genre. A fantasy which tell us: for the moment, call it that.

Nancy Kress does it a different way. Almost all the stories in *The Aliens of Earth* (Arkham House, \$20.95) seem to inhabit genre models with ease and grace and simplicity,

and for a few pages it's possible to wonder why a grown woman would bother writing them. They just do not seem sufficient, the rules of genre, to cause a grownup to shed blood; and the simple enlistings of sf or fantasy premises in stories like "The Price of Oranges" or "The Battle of Long Island" seem to signal a surrender to a slick post-coital definition of the marketplace, just as does the soap-opera clarity of "People Like Us," whose cast seems all too easily understood by author and reader. But of course it doesn't work out that way at all, in the end. In the end, as in her novels, Kress proves to be a highly subversive writer, a burrower from within, a questioner of the narrated truths of genre sf and fantasy who asks her questions in a voice seemingly identical to the voice which tells lies: the voice that says that tropes are true (for they are not: they are condensations which must be earned, watered, fed to live); the voice that says that genre tales are true models of the world (for they are not: they are weapons, taunts bullies shout to mutes). What Nancy Kress does is very subtle, and very easy to run afoul of: very quietly, very inconspicuously, she mixes the cut-out characters and moves of her stories so that they do not add up. In the end, there is always too much in a Nancy Kress story for any of its parts to have actually meant. Some of them read like centipedes at the very instant someone's asked them how they manage to walk. Others read, in the end, like the question: How do you walk, Papa Sci-Fi, Mama F?

These days, the only genre stories that walk are those their authors have managed to escape at the last moment. Each one of the stories in this cold engrossing book is a spoor which leads to a Cheshire smile and a slammed door. Nancy Kress is an escape artist.

(John Clute)

## A Difficult Art

Like a Dimming

The perceptions of a bright child are bright, but childish; those of a dim adult are adult, but dim. This truism bears repeating because of its implication that an adult writing for children must present a complete world, modified to reflect a childish perspective, but with nothing falsified. To attempt anything less is to condescend, and the product will ring leaden as the Famous Five. The greatest mistresses of this supremely difficult art remain E. Nesbit and Joan Aiken, but Diana Wynne Jones's Dalemark books, *Cart and Cwiddar*, *Drowned Ammet*, *The Spellcoats* and *The Crown of Dalemark*

(Mandarin, £3.99 each) suffer only by comparison.

Dalemark was once united under a king, but at the time of the first two books is split into two hostile baronial confederations. Of these the North is more-or-less liberal, the South more-or-less tyrannical. The children who are Jones's main characters have feet in both camps, and suffer misfortunes which involve them in dangerous adult intrigues for which they lack clout and resources but not, as it happens, aptitude.

The books are interlinked, so that the mounting rebellion in the South and the abortive war with the North are observed from contrasting standpoints, but both lead the principals to access of self-knowledge. This is not achieved solely through the experience of being tried and not found wanting; there's a dark thread underlying all the stories which rests uneasily with the overt message. All the children are, to varying degrees, betrayed by adults who are supposed to love them and certainly have a duty towards them, but also have much to lose. When the chips are down, the children find themselves on their own, and it marks them. The revelation is traumatic, but the tone is optimistic; Jones's promise is that those who confront themselves will master themselves (as surely as they will confound their enemies), but she does not address the question of whether the betrayers are to be forgiven, or if so, how. In consequence both books end rather abruptly with a lot of loose ends.

This is excusable, but she also falters somewhat in the confounding: the supernatural element in both *C&C* and *DA* is too one-sided. The bad guys must manage as best they can on a combination of force, cunning and ruthlessness, while the youthful heroes Moril and Mitt obtain respectively the cwiddar (a musical instrument that can literally move mountains in the hands of a master) and the favour of two gods whose attribute names are "Earth Shaker" and "She Who Raised the Islands." Mickey Duff would balk at such a contest.

For *The Spellcoats* Jones goes back to Dalemark's mythological era. It is more ambitious, being somewhat in the nature of a diary novel as the young witch Taniqui magically weaves her story into two "rugcoats." The effect is strongly reminiscent of *Podkayne of Mars*, though the atmosphere is more that of *Earthsea*. Taniqui has little idea of what is going on, and less of what will happen next. Typically, she and her siblings find themselves orphaned and outcast from their home village into the midst of a confused war, and typically they find favour with the Undying, small (or perhaps not so small) gods to whom they are related. The relationships which

develop against the pervasive background of the River (which is also an aspect of one of the gods) while Taniqui weaves are far more interesting than the war, which makes no political or military sense – less of a defect than it appears, as it has been set up. We discover that the important conflict is that between the Undying and the evil mage Kankredin, in which the children, because of their ancestry and attributes, are doubly at hazard; they are actors in the drama, but they are also part of the stake. This is the best of the series, though the ending is as arbitrary as usual, and Jones's admirers have had to wait 14 years for the final resolution, in *The Crown of Dalemark*.

That book brings together Moril and Mitt from the first two, plus the religious elements (and Undying characters) most prominent in the third. The catalyst is Maewen, a young girl brought back in time from "modern" Dalemark to change history. She's a most dangerous plot mechanism, since her perceptions highlight the essential weakness of Dalemark as a milieu – it is uncompromisingly European in feeling, but the bits don't fit. The South has elements of Provence, the Balkans and Lombardy, while the North is obviously Scotland and perhaps Norway. There are no analogues to England or Brittany, but nor is there any sea to cross; yet Maewen is as Anglo-Welsh as her name implies, and "modern" Dalemark is an idealized England of the 1950s.

This, plus the constant intrusions of the Undying, vitiates the atmosphere: Dalemark is a Thomist universe, existing from moment to moment because it is being held up. The same goes for the plot, which is ultimately revealed as an idiot plot, and turning on the idiocy of someone who should have known very much better. He is berated for it in the final scene but this doesn't excuse the author – in my (adult) eyes. For it's all a matter of perspective in the end. These books are excellently written with believable characters, and *C&D* brings them to a satisfactory climax, but their metaphysical weaknesses and dodging of important issues mark them as books to be grown out of. Try them on the bright ten-year-old, or the ultra-bright eight-year-old, but no higher. Youth's a stuff will not endure.

And that might serve as the motto for R.A. MacAvoy's trilogy, *Lens of the World*, *King of the Dead* (Headline, £4.50 each) and *Winter of the Wolf* (£16.99), three fragments from the autobiography of Lord Nazhuret, who is a person of some importance, and who is named after the Lord of the Dead in a pantheon to which he does not subscribe.

In fact the epigraph to the series is

taken from the text and reads as follows: "You are the lens of the world; the lens through which the world becomes aware of itself. The world, on the other hand, is the only lens in which you can see yourself. It is both lenses together that make vision." I don't pretend to know what this means, but suspect that if I did know I would disagree with it. The good news is, it's just about the worst-written passage in all three volumes – the general standards of description, narrative and dialogue are extremely high; I found myself constantly reminded of Alfred Duggan, though the content is more like Gene Wolfe and it's more Jane Gaskell territory than standard S&S, with very few inexplicable experiences.

Nazhuret writes in the first person, fulfilling the command of his sovereign to give an account of his early life, and what grabbed me from the first page was the beautiful control of the writing, and the sense that MacAvoy has visualized everything that takes place in the most precise detail. Nothing serves better to suspend disbelief. Moreover, she never loses sight of her chosen narrative technique of a very long letter, written over several months. The only point where it fails is when Nazhuret comes to describe King Rudof. This rings false, as however candid Nazhuret might choose to be, he ought to slip into the second person – "you appeared to me," not "he appeared to me."

Nazhuret has had a very odd childhood, as is apparent from the first: "My first memory is dimness and movement: the heavy boots of soldiers and the great, white flailing limbs of a cook in my uncle's kitchen. They grunted and heaved and she cried out, not in terror but in weary disgust as they flopped her onto the rough wooden chopping table." The infant is conveyed from whatever disaster has entailed the rape of the cook to a military academy where he receives instruction, but is also used as a general skivvy and occasional object of buggery. He has no knowledge of his identity, presuming himself to be somebody's unloved by-blow. His self-esteem is low, on that account and because he is ugly and stunted.

Having graduated, Nazhuret becomes eligible for indenture as a man-at-arms to whoever may have need of one, a matter of some concern, not all employers being equally careful with soldiers' lives. On his last day of freedom he goes for a solitary walk outside the city, where he stumbles upon an observatory, and Powl, its only inhabitant. Powl unceremoniously kidnaps him, subjects him to a mystical experience and sets about his own course of instruction. This includes mastery of tracking, swordsmanship and unarmed combat, fluency in five languages, and (more interestingly)

expertise as an optician. He is also taught varieties of Taoist philosophy and Zen meditational technique. It's a big programme to cover in three years, but given the assumption that Nazhuret has major potential and is worked extremely hard, not too much to swallow. MacAvoy's careful delineation of his emotional evolution compels belief.

After the three years Nazhuret is turned loose to make his way in the world. Predictably, the Taoist way of quiescence hasn't rooted enough to prevent him from intervening in quarrels which are not truly his own, for then there would be no story. As it is, he makes his way very well, obtains the rewards of virtue, finds love and even discovers his identity. Put like this, it sounds like a rather flat fairy tale, but it's nothing of the kind. It works in a similar way to "Martian" poetry. The people and events are commonplace, but Nazhuret's worldly experience has been so limited, and he has become so attuned to Powl's values, that he confronts them from a mixed viewpoint, combining that of an innocent with that of a superior, alien being.

In a typical passage a little girl has vanished and a transparent paedophile has been speculating about the matter beneath the very window through which she had been stolen:

He was not particularly ill dressed. He looked more presentable than I did. A barman, perhaps, or a baker's assistant. His face was loose and his eyes shiny.

"Four-year-old girls are more tender than four-year-old boys? How is it you know that?" I tried to keep my voice neutral, but I had let my accent slip, and the Old Velonya had a flavour of disparagement all its own.

He backed a pace. "Why...stands to reason."

King of the Deed takes a similar form. Nazhuret is once again writing a letter, this time to Powl, and describing the adventures he and his common-law wife Arlin experience on a diplomatic mission. The situation is complex (and made the more so by the absence of a map), with the one certainty that war is brewing, though neither Nazhuret nor anyone else can understand why. Ultimately the mystery is resolved in a rather lackadaisical fashion, but the interest lies, as usual, in Nazhuret's perception of the many and painful learning opportunities which he encounters on the way.

MacAvoy rather overdoes the device of having him encounter people of curious wisdom (on this occasion a wizard of the nomads, a wise old emperor and a eunuch jeweller), and his innocence is by now wearing rather thin; but the accounts of how things are done, especially when MacAvoy writes about horses and the

plastic arts, still reek of authenticity, and are consequently enthralling.

The same is true of *Winter of the Wolf*, which finds Nazhuret in middle age forced to sort out the dangerous political situation in Velonya following the mysterious death of Rudof. Half the country suspects the new king of having murdered him, and by now the letter which constitutes *Lens of the World* has been published and given rise to a cult which is in rebellion. It's a promising situation, but the promise is never quite fulfilled. Nazhuret, his daughter Navvie and a sinister aristocratic swordsman undertake a long, dangerous and fascinating journey at the end of which they knock the contending parties' heads together and that's that – and not really enough. *WotW* has the look both of a coda to a much longer series and of a book which has been heavily and inexpertly cut. There's a wolf of possibly supernatural character which may be the werewolf from the first book but never actually does anything much, a sea monster ditto, the ghosts of Arlin and Powl likewise, and the officious Jeram Pagg, who has caused a lot of the trouble by insisting on playing St Paul to Nazhuret's conscripted Jesus, but only appears in the last few pages, does nothing, and is never realized as a character.

Surprisingly, for books written with such an air of moral fervour, there seems to be no subtext worth mentioning. MacAvoy expresses distaste for cruelty, hypocrisy and fanaticism, but this is not enough; the three hundred soi-disant holy men who gathered to congratulate Saddam on the invasion of Kuwait would doubtless do the same, and no less sincerely. These are books full of problems, but present no solutions of general application. No doubt the Zen-Taoist way is hereby affirmed, but it leaves the reader feeling cheated.

Even so, the first two are books of real distinction, and for their sake I'd hate to be without the third, though at £17 I'd wait for the paperback. Moreover, there's nothing to stop MacAvoy writing a fourth, longer, better planned and darker in tone, taking in Navvie's childhood and the deaths of Powl and Arlin, and revealing Powl's origin. Nazhuret is simply too fine a character to drop after two shortish novels and a half...Got that, Roberta?

The source-books for the great cycles of myth and legend are rarely easy reading in any translation. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is dry stuff, The *Mohoboroto* is dryer and longer; even the uncut *Arobian Nights* has its longueurs, and when did you last spend a cosy evening with Geoffrey of Monmouth? We owe a lot to the modernisers, who have debts of their own to their material and to us, their readers.

In *The Winged Man* (Headline, £5.99) Moyra Caldecott sets out the story of Prince Bladud, son of King Hudibras of Albion, later High King himself and father of King Lear, for the modern reader. It's a story with which we British really ought to be more familiar – the Matter of Britain doesn't begin and end with Cymbeline, King Arthur and Old King Cole – and she has adopted a scholarly approach comparable to Poul Anderson's reconstruction of Hrolf Kraki's saga. Unfortunately, the Greek and Roman scholarship is patchy; Ascanius was the son of Aeneas by Creusa, not Lavinia, and Tisiphone was a fury, not a guardian giant. This casts doubt on the less familiar Celtic, and the book suffers more radically in other ways. Caldecott has little ear for English, so we get nooks and crannies, flashing eyes, a veil "like a mist," competitors "raring to go" and the horses are steeds as often as not. That could have been alleviated with better editing, but other problems are fundamental.

A hero from a primitive milieu will win more sympathy if he's a man somewhat ahead of his time, yet for credibility he must still belong to that time, and recognize its assumptions, lest he emerge as a prig. Ideally the tribulations of his story should bring him to enhanced wisdom and virtue, so that he transcends the background he can never divorce; such is the mode of the Bildungsroman. Bladud certainly lacks both wisdom and virtue as the tale begins. The first episode finds him the victim of a crude badger game involving the courtesies of the gaming table, a great deal of mead and a wanton, beautiful princess. I don't blame him in the least – I only regret I'm unlikely ever to be targeted in the same way – but having succumbed, Bladud puts the matter from his mind; thus, when the forfeit falls due and he hasn't so much as mentioned it to his father, neither is prepared. This doesn't suggest much kingly potential, but it's just what one would expect of a prig who was also a moral weakling. That in turn implies a weakness of Caldecott's own: her concept of manhood condones such conduct. It also condones bigamy – well enough known in the classical world, but a gentleman was expected to tell his prospective bride's father how many wives were at home before the ceremony.

Time after time Bladud panics himself into an unprincipled display of public gaucherie, but Caldecott has sympathy only for her hero – who can therefore do without mine. The point is, you see, he's good. And as everyone knows, "Be good, sweet maid, and let who can be clever;" – the good are out of it, and so is Bladud. Despite being moronic, he gets plenty of supernatural soliciting – from druid shamans, tutelary birds, ancestral ghosts,

the Cumaean Sybil and Grandmother Aphrodite, no less. He needs it all, because on his own he lacks conspicuously the forethought to avoid tough spots, and the cunning to escape them. Confronted by a brutal pirate he shuts his eyes and waits for the end – no chance, worse luck. Some officious god rescues him with a fireball. All right, he's no fighter; but he's no diplomat either. I lost count of the occasions he doesn't rise to because the cat has his tongue, likewise those he rises to all too well because his brains are in his scrotum. It makes for a messy life, and leads to a messy death – showing off his man-powered glider to the neglect of his kingdom – but Caldecott's sympathy is boundless.

I presume she has been faithful to her sources, in which case we now know why Shakespeare made Lear such a berk: he's still a young man at the end of the book, but already showing the narcissism and self-pity that did for him and his daughters in old age. Bladud for a father-figure must have been no small handicap. Come back, Nuncle, all is forgiven.

While Bladud neglects his responsibilities, the prince in Freda Warrington's *Sorrow's Light* (Pan, £8.99) takes his altogether too seriously, to the dismay of Iolithe, his young wife who narrates the story. It's less a story than a highly unorthodox theological tract, being based on the Prayer Paradox.

As readers' reactions to the book will turn on their view of that paradox, with which not all will be familiar, I must expound it here:

God is presumed to be omniscient, absolutely wise and absolutely concerned for the good of mankind. From this it follows that He has a perfect plan for the world, upon which no improvement is possible. It follows thence that any alteration to His plan, however minor, would mar its perfection – which would be a sin, of which God is by definition not capable. Thus any attempt to influence God in the direction of changing His plan (e.g., by prayer) is both sinful and futile. To pray for anything (as opposed to prayers of adoration, thanksgiving and contrition) comes into that category. A god who was vain, capricious or insouciant might well be more open to suggestion, but would be correspondingly less suitable for adoration.

As any Christian will tell you, the Prayer Paradox is a wicked delusion of the Evil One, and easily resolved. Should you find yourself thinking that to work for things is better than to pray, you must pray to cease to do so; "Deliver us from evil" is the operative phrase. Thus is the Power of Prayer asserted and glorified.

Freda Warrington, through her heroine, rejects this resolution. Iolithe is married at 16 to Prince Tykavn of Torlossen, the lesser province of a land

under constant threat from the Unseen, demons who have stolen half the kingdom and worship the Evil (and female) Principle of Sudema, embodied in the violet star of evening. It is immediately apparent to the reader that Torlossen lives only by sufferance of the Unseen, but Tykavn believes that he, as prince, is sustaining it by unremitting prayer and ritualistic observance; it is no less apparent to Iolithe that he's ruining his health and her sex life in the process.

Having failed to divert his energies into healthier channels, Iolithe sets out on an unsanctioned expedition across the Stolen Land in search of a cure for him, at which point the story rather sags. She is rescued by an insufferably tedious magician who wastes too much time asserting his superiority for her to learn anything before the Unseen overwhelm him. As a last gift he turns her into a doe, which is in due course good news for a dominant buck. This episode over, she witnesses a gory but (apparently) salutary surgical operation which in fact destroys the patient. And so forth, while the plot remains stalled. The episodes are well done but disjointed, though hindsight reveals their underlying unity. In the capital things perk up, as she once again encounters the bland assumption that her worries are impious or at best imaginary, since Tykavn is not a maniac, but a conscientious prince, and far too good for her. Too much! Iolithe takes off again, back among the Unseen and to the concluding confrontations. There's nowhere else.

Sorrow's Light is sustained by the single emotion of indignation, and will strike a chord in anyone with experience of being right, and being outvoted or outranked by those in the wrong. This makes for monolithic characterization, but it's a book of passionate integrity for all that – none of the issues is dodged. As it's also wholly unlike *A Taste of Blood Wine* in mood and content, there's no reason to suppose it will appeal to much of the same audience, but I certainly look forward to Miss Warrington's next effort.

The final offering, Ann Tracy's *Winter Hunger* (Virago, £5.99), barely qualifies as fantasy, being explicable at a pinch in terms of mental breakdown. It belongs to the grim-deeds-in-isolated-community genre, but is written more as a psychological study. It is also far better written than most.

Alan Hooper, an agreeable if vapid young man, has gone with his wife and small son to a village in northern Manitoba, there to study the Indians (whom Tracy deserves a small prize for not patronizing as "native Americans") for what even he realizes will be a wholly naff PhD thesis, leading in

time to tenured professorship at a fourth-rate college somewhere. This hyper-modest and mildly parasitic ambition is monstrously punished when an old lady of the community is afflicted with a Windigo, a malign spirit/psychotic condition taking the form of irrepressible cannibalistic urges. Attempts to purge her of it fail, killing her instead, and shortly thereafter Alan finds that it has settled on himself. With commendable fortitude he retreats to Toronto, where he conducts his own lay exorcism.

Satisfied that he is no longer a danger to his family he returns to the village, only to find that the unassuaged Windigo has preceded him. What horrid welcome awaits him? Read it to find out! It's worth the effort, being not only a promising first novel but a that rare item, a horror story with a dry sense of humour.

(Chris Gilmore)

## Scanners Wendy Bradley

I had intended to begin with Tad Williams' latest but I find it impossible to deal with calmly as it is one of those rare books that make me so angry I can feel my brain trying to explode, just as in the movie. However just as long as I keep taking deep, cleansing breaths and thinking calm, neutral thoughts about, oh, I don't know, the square on the hypotenuse and the formation of ox-bow lakes, I think I can probably sneak up on it later on. Watch this space – but watch out for flying grey matter.

First of all let's talk about **Heart Readers** by Kristine Kathryn Rusch (Millennium, £7.99). This is all right. Nothing to make the brain boil here, unless you get picky and count the way the blurb-writer spells the king's name as Pardue when the book gives it as Pardu.

Pardu is one of a long line of kings born a twin in a culture where there can be only one king – the custom is for the twin whose "heart isn't pure" to be killed so the other can rule solo. Pardu's twin sons are raised together and Stashie the heart reader and her partner and lesbian lover Dasis are the ones chosen to read the prince's hearts by a kind of combination of telepathy and rune-telling. But Stashie was brutalized as a child by the evil general Tarne who wants to rule via one of the twins – either one will do. Vasenu is chosen over Ele but Ele is the one Tarne decides will make a more pliable puppet king. Tarne tries to kill Vasenu and kidnaps Ele but Vasenu's heart really is pure and the twins are respectively rescued and reconciled to

rule together. Stashie kills Tarne at last and she and Dasis live happily ever after. Put like that it sounds both preposterous and contrived but in fact it was a novel I enjoyed hugely, both for its vivid characters and its wholly unsentimental depiction of real emotions. And it was a real page turner, too. Recommended.

Moving on, in Peter Morwood's **The Golden Horde** (Legend, £8.99), third in the Prince Ivan series, the engaging hero now has twin children, conveniently one of each, and his dad has abdicated him the throne because his second sight tells him something really bad is coming down that will need a younger, stronger man to deal with it. The invasion of the Mongol horde is what actually turns up, destroying any little Russian prince who doesn't submit, and the reason Ivan has to be tsar is because he's the only one (I'm sorry this sounds so terribly PC but there you are) secure enough in his own machismo to devise the cunning plan of conceding and so saving his people. However the Khan doesn't want Ivan's crown figuratively but literally as he is putting together a collection of magical regalia which, Ivan's wife Mar'ya Morevna calculates, will tear such a hole in reality that all kinds of bad stuff will get through. Fortunately Ivan's kids have whizzo magical powers of their own and can "gate" (teleport magically) like nobody's business. Ivan gets them to nick back a couple of the crowns – but they're too late, there's a demon on the loose. Mar'ya Morevna conjures up a counterbalance but everything is in equilibrium till the kids sacrifice themselves (yea yea, they survive, what did you expect?) to put back the crowns, explaining sanctimoniously that you can't do good by doing bad. Well, all right, I'll go with it so far, but no further. The ending, when Ivan wimps out and takes his whole kingdom into the Summer Country, out of nasty, dangerous old reality and into the realm of faerie, doesn't strike me as worthy of any of Morwood's characters and had me stomping around going "bleah!" for days.

More Mongol hordes in William James' **The Earth is the Lord's** (the first book in the Sunfall Trilogy; Orbit, £5.99). This time we have Mongols-with-claws on a long-time-from-now Earth where a stranded bunch of space travellers rise to power in the Mongol horde as the horde invades their neighbours the Alan. (Impossible as the name sounds, a wargaming friend tells me there once really was a bunch called "the Alan" roistering around the right sort of area.) The main characters, Rostov the stranded spacer and Burun the warlord with integrity, are acceptable but James seems to have trouble keeping track of his cast –

Rostov's son Alexei disappears into the "file till needed" bin fairly early on – and I kept having to look back at the family tree right to the end of the book, not really a promising start to what looks like a developing saga. Weirdly engaging but thin stuff, a flat level steppe of a book that needed some variation in texture, some highs or lows, to give you perspective.

So that's the good stuff, the good but mildly irritating stuff and the weird but interesting stuff dealt with. On to the more serious irritants. In Louise Cooper's **Aisling**, the eighth and last episode of the Indigo Saga (Grafton, £4.99), Indigo finally returns home and the seven-demons-plot is unravelled. Well not so much unravelled as deconstructed since it turns out that most of the characters we have met are nothing more than aspects of Indigo's own personality and that the final, worst demon she has to face is Fenran, her lover and plot token, himself. Er, but what about the religious/magical/ethical framework of the story? She was supposed to have (a) freed seven demons, (b) been instructed by mother Earth to go and get them back, and (c) to be rewarded for this by Fenran's liberation from demon otherworld. So why has she lived so long and how much of her adventuring was inside her own head and why are the universe's rules suddenly cancelled? I felt as though I had stepped off a cliff, rather than reached the end of a maze.

And then there is **To Green Angel Tower** by Tad Williams, the third and final volume of "Memory, Sorrow and Thorn" (Legend, £16.99). Now, we have had three volumes, each weighing in at about a thousand pages, of this epic. Some of it has been slow, some of it has been very slow, but some of it has been absorbing and engaging and I for one have come to like the lead characters. However, at the end it is Princess Miriamelle who strikes the symbolic blow that saves the universe while the heroic Simon is just standing around being enchanted and stuff. Nevertheless she is disqualified from inheriting the throne for the happy-ever-after section because, forsooth, she is (a) not a virgin, (b) her father's daughter and (c) only a girl – and so the leftover characters offer the throne to Simon! Aaargh! Williams then has Miriamelle happily married to Simon, Simon running things efficiently in spite of his inexperience and never a twitch of domestic tension between them. Women and power, huh? Can't conceive it, can't imagine it, so can't bloody write it. Not good enough.

(Wendy Bradley)

# Deep Throat?

Pete Crowther

Peter Straub's **The Throat** (HarperCollins, £15.99), is a thick, dense, brooding saga of old crimes, new crimes, the bestiality of war, the loss of childhood and the fragility of the human mind, all mixed together and served up in a dazzling mystery which is part ghost story, part detective procedural and part metaphysical dissertation.

At its most basic, it is essentially a story about the small American town of Millhaven and two of its "sons" – a pair of serial killers. (In fact there's actually a third in the book, an Ed Gein copyist called The Meat Man who decorates his home with severed heads and who keeps various limbs and entrails in his freezer: but, though pivotal to plot progression, his "work" is incidental to the real story.) The activities of these killers are separated by some 40 years, the war in Vietnam and the success of another Millhaven "ex-pat," Tim Underhill, who, when the book opens, lives in New York.

When we first meet him – in this book: the same character appears in Straub's *Koko* (1988), a book which we learn, in an audacious and fascinating piece of dramatic license, was "actually" co-written (along with 1990's *Mystery*) by Underhill and "a novelist named Peter Straub" – Underhill has received a call for help from an old Millhaven friend, John Ransom. The reason for the call is that Ransom's wife has been brutally beaten and left for dead. Scrawled on the wall by her body are the words *Blue Rose*, the one-time calling card of the man who murdered, among others, Underhill's own sister when he was only seven years old, and the title – some 12 years later – of a tune recorded by a Millhaven-based tenor saxophonist as a memorial to his pianist, another of the victims. But the killer – a deranged policeman called – took his own life in 1950. The question is, is this new assailant a copy-cat killer or was the policeman innocent?

Underhill returns immediately to Millhaven where he soon enlists the help of a Sherlock Holmes-like recluse whose powers of deduction and investigation are legendary and who lives in the old house left to him by his uncle, Lamont von Heilitz, the "real life" inspiration behind *The Shadow*, the great character from the pulps and 1940s radio. (Of course, Pasmore was himself an inspiration behind the supposed collaborative novel, *Mystery*.) The plot thickens.

En route back to the town of his childhood, Underhill recalls, in almost parallel flashbacks, the death of his sister and his stint in the war, when

he worked on the body squad, a small group of men whose job was to bag-up dead GIs for their return to America. Amidst recollections of frequently seeing his sister, long after her death, on streets and in aeroplanes Underhill remembers meeting up with Ransom again, out in the strangeness of Vietnam, where his one-time childhood friend had been charged with tracking down a Green Beret. The things they had discovered there had changed their lives and their attitudes forever, he realizes. But what Underhill doesn't realize is that some of those changes – although already initiated – have not yet fully shown themselves ... and will not do so until he has actually completed his visit to his old home town. Before then, he must unravel many mysteries – not least the appearance of a crying man in an empty house and the significance of the St. Alwyn Hotel, around which many of the killings took place, and an old movie called *From Dangerous Depths* – and lay many ghosts, including the half-memory of the old butcher, Heinz Stenmitz, whose fondness for young boys was an additional controversy during the bygone days of Millhaven.

With a cast of characters and a magnitude of plot that Dickens would have given his eye-teeth for, *The Throat* moves inexorably – by turn, languidly and frantically – towards its climax. And though at points throughout its telling the tale becomes complex, every development and revelation is fully and painstakingly explained at the end. Some of the setpieces are so full and rich that one cannot help feeling that they've actually happened – of particular note are a disorientating walk in the fog, when Underhill completely loses his bearings; a soul-destroying hike through the Vietnamese jungle, during which new perceptions awaken; a desperate duel on a foggy highway; a visit to a county hospital whose "facilities" make even the worst inadequacies of the National Health Service seem luxurious by comparison; and the truly magnificent, nail-biting, 30-page climax in a darkened cinema.

Stylistically blending the masterful nostalgia of Bradbury's *A Graveyard for Lunatics*, the mesmerizing detail and characterization of John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, and the clinical descriptions of total alienness that so characterized Tim O'Brien's Vietnam journal, *The Things They Carried*, Straub has built a towering edifice onto an already enviable reputation but, in so doing, has sadly brought to an end a canon of work which comprises three exceptional novels and two excellent short stories ("Blue Rose," from Dennis Etchison's *Cutting Edge* anthology, and "The Juniper Tree" from Doug Winter's

much-lauded *Prime Evil*). When the last page is turned one cannot help feeling the almost indescribable sadness of being finally separated from old friends.

That *The Throat* will appear on everyone's shortlist for best novel of 1993 is – or certainly should be – a foregone conclusion; only the few months that remain of the year will decide whether it takes the medal. Unreservedly recommended.

In a relatively rare appearance on the back of someone else's book jacket – which clearly gives greater value to the currency of his testimonials – Peter Straub lavishes great praise on what one can only hope is the first volume of a delightful autobiography.

The book in question is Robert Bloch's so-called "Unauthorized Autobiography," *Once Around the Bloch* (Tor, \$22.95) – a title which seems immediately apposite when one recalls that its author once stated in an interview that, despite the stories that he wrote, he actually had the heart of a small boy. He then added, "I keep it in a jar on my desk." However, that simple tongue-in-cheek statement was to haunt Bloch throughout his life causing him understandable annoyance – particularly when it is used in introduction as though there is little else to the man.

In fact, there are many more things to Robert Bloch than that neither that Addams Family-style bon mot nor even *Psycho* – rightly regarded as a watershed in horror fiction – does full justice. Not least of these is a punishing electoral campaign as joint speechwriter/P.R. wunderkind that lasted the best part of a year, nettled the then 23-year-old Bloch and his companion zilch financially and takes up some 46 pages of his autobiography (which is, it must be said, a little more than it deserves). Nevertheless, it is an enjoyable diversion from the genre-related anecdotes and it serves as a wonderful journey through Americana and politics... a kind of cross between *All the President's Men* and Jack Finney's *Time And Again*.

But if it is the more usual side of Bloch that draws your fancy, you'll be far from disappointed. For example:

Here's the story of Bloch sending early (painfully bad) stories to H.P. Lovecraft... and getting helpful replies!

Here's the story about August Derleth telling Bloch not to give up his day job... and then, a decade later, publishing his first collection of short stories.

Here's the story about Bloch's involvement with the ill-fated television series spin-off from Stephen King's *Salem's Lot*.

And here are a whole load more stories involving Hitchcock, Ray

Bradbury, Boris Karloff, Buster Keaton, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, *Amazing Stories*, *Forry Ackerman*, *Weird Tales*...and many, many more.

Once *Around The Bloch* is a joyful and amusing book, a testament to hard work, good luck and being a nice guy. The last word goes to Bloch who, when approached by somebody who said that after seeing *Psycho* they had been unable to take a shower, retorted, "You're lucky I didn't kill my victim on a toilet seat!" Now there's a thought...

A new set of short stories by Ramsey Campbell is always an event to look forward to and his collection *Strange Things and Stranger Places* (Tor, \$18.95) is no exception. But although Campbell cites the first story – "Cat and Mouse," an enjoyable (if workmanlike) 1972 yarn concerning a feline haunting – and his 1990 novella, "Needing Ghosts," which closes the book, as being logical departure and arrival points on this particular line, it is, perhaps, the second tale, "Medusa," another novella, which provides a more logical and apposite frontispiece.

"Medusa," which, although written in 1973, did not appear until 1987 (and only then as a 300-edition chapbook from Footsteps Press), is a purely delightful piece of writing; but it is also worthy of particular note by virtue of the fact that it is science fiction. Reminiscent of the wonderfully alien and off-kilter stories from John Varley in the 1970s – particularly his debut novel, *The Ophiuchi Hotline* – and, of course, of Frederik Pohl's *Heechee* saga, "Medusa" paints a portrait of a futuristic society which, while bizarre, is a logical extension of our own.

Mankind has left Earth and spread to other worlds, all called Earth but each bearing a numerical suffix. Thus, "Old Earth," as it is known on the various colonies, becomes "Earth 0" to the men and women who fly the Argosy spaceships.

Onto the planet Fecundity, currently under consideration as a new outpost, An, a female telepath (another similarity to Varley's predilection for female protagonists) is drafted in order to enter the minds of the indigenous lifeforms – mute, plant-like creatures – to attempt to discover the significance of Eveningstar, the planet's moon, whose rising causes the plant creatures to hide from view. A subsequent journey from Fecundity to Eveningstar itself – the development of which draws to mind Clifford Simak's 1951 story, "Beachhead" – brings An revelations: the answers to some questions, certainly, but, with them, additional questions plus hypotheses concerning such diverse topics as sexual behaviour, parental responsibility and the

entire life/death/rebirth process. It's a fascinating piece of writing which demands attention. If this is what amounts to one of Campbell's "trunk stories," then it's high time we ransacked his house.

"Needing Ghosts" is a disturbing heller-skelter, a ghost train ride brimful of paranoia and a fiercer than normal dose of Campbell's usual air of malevolent menace. Throughout a veritable avalanche of mind-numbing encounters with the quasi-normal inhabitants of the story's fractured reality, the hapless Simon Mottershead reels and staggers on a downward spiral to discover his own identity. In what amounts to a showcase of macabre vignettes – among which are a cabbie who tears a strip off Mottershead's £20 note when his fare announces that he has nothing smaller; a street of incomplete buildings festooned with plastic mannequins; a title-changing book which Mottershead carries in his rucksack; and the scuttling thing in the head of a toy doll – the most disturbing is unquestionably the protagonist's total absence of questioning. Instead, he receives the events which befall him with a blind (if, occasionally, grudging) acceptance, until the final revelations show things for what they truly are, with the last page leaving a lingering taste of horror that really did mark a new high when the story first appeared from Legend three years ago. It's interesting to see that it's still not been overtaken.

(Pete Crowther)

## Three Strange Questions

Peter T. Garratt

How do you get a haemophobic who dislikes all mention of blood, and has been known to faint at talk of mysterious losses of the stuff, to read and enjoy a vampire novel? I mean someone who hasn't even thought of lapping at the recent rush of vamp novels by suspects usually suspected of other (perhaps better) things.

The answer is to get Jack Yeovil to write it, as the Warhammer people did with *Genevieve Undead* (Boxtree, £3.99). This is a semi-sequel to the excellent *Drachenfels*, and to some extent the equally good *Beasts in Velvet* (not, alas, yet back in print). Yeovil's style is a kind of post-modern horror comedy, in which influences from a range of directions are cannibalized with gusto, and while a variety of horror tropes are deployed, it lacks the felling I find offputting about much true horror, that evil forces are almost indestructible and can only be

overcome by superhuman effort, or more likely avoided by luck.

The amiable vampire *Genevieve* Dieudonné now seems to be Yeovil's main running character, having lately materialized in *Anno Dracula*, which he published as by Kim Newman. She is unjustly feared, as she only feeds on consenting adults, who mostly enjoy the privilege, and is more to be trusted than any other character present. The book comprises three novelettes: "Stage Blood," a direct sequel to *Drachenfels* and Yeovil at his best; "The Cold Stark House," an amusing deconstruction of the Gothic Novel, and "Unicorn Ivory." Highly recommended.

Why is Yeovil allowed to take more liberties with the Warhammer shared-worlds than other writers? "The Cold Stark House," for instance, would be hard to envisage as a game scenario, unless one counts literary games, and many of his Chaos figures, like the famous monster known as the Trappdoor Daemon in "Stage Blood," are more complex and redeemable than their status in the Warhammer world would imply.

It could be significant that Yeovil did not get involved in the "Warhammer 40,000" project. *Deathwing* edited by David Pringle and Neil Jones (Boxtree, £3.99), 40K's first book of shorts, has now been reprinted. While the quality of writing is what one might expect from Interzone favourites like Ian Watson, Charles Stross, Bill King and Storm Constantine, they have difficulty with the much less flexible scenario they have been given. It's a simplistic conflict between the benevolently totalitarian Empire and assorted nasties, all of which must be destroyed without remorse. There are complex, redeemable characters here, doing terrible things regrettably, but these are the good guys. A one-dimensional ethos more suitable for a battle against disease than a conflict between intelligent species prevails, like *Spinrad's* *The Iron Dream* without the irony.

What link is there between the Arthurian legends and the work of M. John Harrison? MJH has not to my knowledge produced any explicit Arthuriana, but according to Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman's *King Arthur: The True Story* (Arrow, £5.99) the historical site of Camelot is most likely to have been the Roman city of Viroconium, near Wroxeter in Shropshire.

This idea stems from the discovery that Viroconium was rebuilt at a time when Roman Britain was in technological decline. It kept a Roman style, but simpler materials – timber not stone – were employed. Later, it seems the timbers were removed and re-used elsewhere, probably on a site that was easier to defend.

Phillips and Keatman have analysed the limited evidence available to show that Arthur is as likely to be associated with the Shropshire area, then probably part of Powys, as anywhere else. They suggest that the name "Arthur" itself may have been a kind of nickname, and link genealogical records to references in Gildas, the one near-contemporary witness, to produce a name and family they say are those of the mysterious hero. The book is carefully laid out, starting with background information and a summary of the legend, then examining the few and controversial sources in detail. The name is not revealed before the end, and I will not spoil readers' pleasure by giving it away here.

Unlike the authors of some Arthurian revelations, they show awareness that most of the written evidence, even the earliest, is doubtfully reliable. There can, and will, be disagreements over some of their emphases, but they do not rely on sources discounted entirely by scholars. However, they devote a lot of space to summaries, even of quite uncontroversial material, and I would have preferred more detail to justify their choice of evidence.

This particularly relates to their use of archaeological dating material. There is nothing in the book to indicate their qualifications to assess this difficult subject: but, even as an amateur myself, I have to say they often offer with confidence dates which I am sure were originally approximations or averages of possibilities. For instance they give AD 520 as the likely date for the dismantling of the wooden buildings at Viroconium, conveniently near their date for the death of Arthur: but I know of no archaeologist who would be this definite about such an event. It could have occurred many decades earlier or later. Similarly, they do not mention that this type of post-Roman development, which can only be proved at Viroconium, may have gone on in other cities where later rebuilding destroyed the evidence.

However, I would cautiously recommend *The True Story* as a readable and reasonably sober introduction to Arthuriana, which existing enthusiasts will want to evaluate for themselves.

(Peter Garratt)

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## Books Received

### August 1993

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by *Interzone* during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Ackroyd, Peter. **English Music**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-016941-5, 400pp, paperback, £6.99. (Quasi-fantasy, quasi-historical, "timeslip" novel in what has become Ackroyd's usual mode; first published in 1992; this one got a dreadful review in the *Guardian* but other critics, including Patrick McGrath and Tom Shippey [both quoted here by Penguin], seem to have enjoyed it.) 2nd September 1993.

Anthony, Piers. **Fractal Mode**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21347-3, 414pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; second in the "Mode" trilogy.) 13th September 1993.

Atkins, Peter. **Morningstar**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21480-1, 287pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1992.) 13th September 1993.

Atwood, Margaret. **Good Bones**. Virago, ISBN 1-85381-615-9, 153pp, paperback, £4.99. (Collection, first published in Canada [?], 1992; most of these pieces are short-stories or prose poems, and many of them are fantasies [sort of].) 9th September 1993.

Bear, Greg. **Moving Mars**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85515-X, 448pp, hardcover, no price shown. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; yet another big novel about the near-future colonization of the red planet. It's dedicated to Ray Bradbury.) 1 November 1993.

Bear, Greg. **Songs of Earth and Power**. Legend, ISBN 0-09-987760-0, 693pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first published in the USA, 1992; the two novels it contains first appeared in 1984 and 1986; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 70.) 16th September 1993.

Boito, Camillo. **Senso (and Other Stories)**. Translated by Christine Donougher. Introduction by Roderick Conway Morris. Dedalus, ISBN 0-946626-83-9, 207pp, paperback, £6.99. (Horror collection, first edition; the six long stories gathered here were first published in Italy between 1867 and 1895; Camillo Boito [1836-1914] is regarded as "one of the major Italian authors of his period and the master of the novella form"; his characteristic work combines "decadence, the macabre and the demonic.") 9th September 1993.

Bonanno, Margaret Wander. **OtherWise**. "The Third Volume in The Others Series." St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-09358-6, 306pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Sf novel, first edition.) 18th August 1993.

Caveney, Philip. **Black Wolf**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0745-3, 311pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; this one is about "a young British horror writer" who is stalked by an obsessive fan; it should be of personal interest to Messrs Campbell, Gallagher, Harris, Morris, etc.) 9th September 1993.

Caveney, Philip. **Speak No Evil**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-4045-0, 308pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in 1993; the British author is new to

us, but we're told he has published three previous novels, *The Sins of Rachel Ellis*, *Tiger*, *Tiger* and *The Torontolo Stone*, which presumably belong more to the crime field than the horror field.) 16th September 1993.

Conley, Martha. **Growing Light**. "A mystery novel." St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-09823-5, 228pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (Crime novel, first edition; it's set in "New Age" California and has computer stuff in; "Martha Conley" is a pseudonym of sf writer Marta Randall; on the cover, Charles de Lint commends the book.) 1 September 1993.

Cornell, Paul, Martin Day and Keith Topping. **The Guinness Book of Classic British TV**. Guinness Publishing, ISBN 0-85112-543-3, 444pp, trade paperback, £14.99. (Guide to UK TV programmes of the past, first edition; along with many soaps, sitcoms and mainstream dramas, this proficient book gives details of such sf and fantasy TV items as Nigel Kneale's plays, *Doctor Who* and *Red Dwarf*, among many others.) 6th September 1993.

Crichton, Michael. **The Andromeda Strain**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-931951-9, 295pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1969; this is one of a stream of Crichton reissues in the wake of the massive success of *Jurassic Park*.) 2nd September 1993.

Crichton, Michael, writing as John Lange. **Binary**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-931961-6, 169pp, paperback, £4.99. (Technothriller, first published in the USA, 1972.) 2nd September 1993.

Crichton, Michael. **Congo**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-932081-9, 370pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1980; this is the one in which Crichton does a variation on Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Torzon* and the *Lion Man* [without Tarzan]; see further comments under Nicholas Luard, below.) 2nd September 1993.

Datlow, Ellen, ed. **Omni Best Science Fiction Three**. Omni Books [324 West Wendover Ave., Suite 200, Greensboro, NC 27408, USA], ISBN 0-87455-284-2, v + 266pp, paperback, \$8.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; it consists of one story [by Thomas M. Disch] reprinted from *Omni* magazine, plus ten original pieces; the latter are by Pat Cadigan, John Crowley, Ursula Le Guin, Ian McDonald, Pat Murphy and others; an impressive line-up.) *Lois entry: June publication, received in August 1993.*

Davies, G.G. **Fire and Air: The Master Pieces Triptych**. Nemuco Ltd. [PO Box 1115, Kings Norton, Birmingham B30 1SJ], ISBN 1-898023-01-8, 111pp, hardcover, £11.90. (Sf collection, first edition; this small-press item by a new British writer consists of three linked novellas; states the blurb: "Travel on a three stage journey into time, space, matter, relativity, quantum mechanics, philosophy and strange adventure.") 1st October 1993.

De Lint, Charles. **The Little Country**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-32106-4, 630pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) 10th September 1993.

De Lint, Charles. **Yarrow: An Autumn Tale**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31112-3, 244pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1986; reviewed by Ken Brown in *Interzone* 61.) 10th September 1993.

Ellis, Peter Berresford, and Jennifer Schofield. **Biggles: The Life Story of Capt. W.E. Johns**. 2nd edition. Veloce Publishing [Serenity Barn, Godmanstone, Dorset DT2 7AE], ISBN 1-874105-26-X, 320pp,

hardcover, £12.99. (Biography of the children's author [1893-1968], best known for his stories of First World War flying ace Biggles, who also wrote much juvenile science fiction; the first edition appeared in 1981 as *By Jove, Biggles: The Life of Captain W.E. Johns* by P. Horsford Ellis and "Piers Williams" [the latter being a pseudonym for Jennifer Schofield]; this edition has a new afterword and some corrections; lively and good fun, it's recommended to the nostalgic.) *Lote entry: July (?) publication, received in August 1993.*

Gallagher, Stephen. **Nightmare**, with Angel. Hodder/Cornet, ISBN 0-340-59690-2, 506pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in 1992; Gallagher has now been dubbed "the finest British writer of best-selling popular fiction since Le Carré," by John Williams in the independent; good going, Steve.) 16th September 1993.

Garnett, David, ed. **New Worlds 3**. Gollancz/VG/SF, ISBN 0-575-05146-9, 223pp, paperback, £6.99. (SF anthology, first edition; it contains new stories by Brian Aldiss, Paul Di Filippo, Peter F. Hamilton, Gwyneth Jones, Graham Joyce, Paul J. McAuley and others, plus non-fiction contributions from John Clute and Michael Moorcock; recommended.) 30th September 1993.

Gentle, Mary. **Grunts!** "A fantasy with attitude." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13629-8, 480pp, paperback, £4.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in 1992; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 66.) 23rd September 1993.

Gerrold, David. **Under the Eye of God**. Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-29010-X, 328pp, paperback, \$5.99. (SF novel, first edition; proof copy received.) December 1993.

Gilluly, Sheila. **The Emperor of Earth**. "The Third Book of the Painter." Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0676-7, 314pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 9th September 1993.

Grant, Nicholas. **Khan**. Little, Brown, ISBN 0-316-90413-9, 452pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Near-future thriller, first edition; a descendant of Chengis Khan attempts to recreate his empire in the year 2000; "Nicholas Grant" is a pseudonym of West Indian-born Christopher Nicole, who has been an extraordinarily prolific writer of crime and historical fiction over the past 40 years; with his wife, he has also written some marginal sf as "Max Marlow.") 12th August 1993.

Gray, Alasdair. **Poor Things**. Illustrated by the author. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-017554-7, xvi+318pp, paperback, £5.99. (Quasi-sf, quasi-horror novel in what has become Gray's usual mode; first published in 1992; winner of the Whitbread Award and the Guardian Fiction Prize; a note states that "some mistakes in the original hardback have been corrected in this Penguin edition"; reviewed by John Clute and by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 69 — they both recommended it highly.) 5th August 1993.

Greenberg, Martin H., ed. **New Stories from the Twilight Zone**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0329-0, viii+419pp, paperback, £4.99. (SF/fantasy horror anthology, first published in the USA, 1991; reviewed by Ken Brown in *Interzone* 69.) 9th September 1993.

Gregory, Philippa. **The Wise Woman**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-016781-1, 626pp, paperback, £4.99. (Historical horror/romance novel, first published in 1992; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 64.) 5th August 1993.

Hall, Hal W., ed. **Science Fiction and Fantasy Reference Index, 1983-1991: An International Author and Subject Index to History and Criticism**. Libraries Unlimited [P.O. Box 6633, Englewood, CO 80155-6633, USA], ISBN 1-56308-113-X, xiii+677pp, hardcover, \$90 [£108 including postage outside USA]. (Index to criticism and comment on sf/fantasy, first edition; this large volume, which is a consolidation of Hal Hall's annual paperback indexes, supplements an earlier big hardcover volume which was entitled *Science Fiction and Fantasy Reference Index, 1878-1985*; although it would appear to cover only seven years of sf scholarship, the new book does in fact contain a great many older entries which were omitted from the earlier volume; like the primary literature itself, criticism of sf and fantasy has been growing apace, so this book will be extremely useful for anyone researching the subjects; highly recommended to all librarians, academics, critics and commentators.) *Lote entry: July publication, received in August 1993.*

Hambly, Barbara. **Dog Wizard**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21730-4, 389pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1993.) 13th September 1993.

Hutson, Shaun. **Deadhead**. Little, Brown, ISBN 0-316-90408-2, 326pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror novel, first edition.) 26th August 1993.

Hutson, Shaun. **Heathen**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0136-0, 402pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1992.) 26th August 1993.

James, Peter. **Host**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05619-3, 477pp, hardcover, £15.99. (SF/horror novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 28th October 1993.

Jefferies, Mike. **Hidden Echoes**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-647101-3, 336pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1992; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 70.) 31st August 1993.

Jordan, Robert. **The Fires of Heaven**. "Book V of The Wheel of Time." Tor, ISBN 0-312-85427-7, 702pp, hardcover, £24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) November 1993.

Knight, Harry Adam. **Carnosaur**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05658-4, 214pp, paperback, £4.99. (SF/horror novel, first published in 1984; here it is back in print at last, the original genetically-engineered-dinosaurs novel which is now the basis of a Roger Corman-produced film: "Harry Adam Knight" is a pseudonym of John Brosnan.) 2nd September 1993.

Laymon, Richard. **Endless Night**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0933-2, 310pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition [?]; Laymon is prolific; this appears to be his second brand-new novel from Headline in the space of three months.) 9th September 1993.

Laymon, Richard. **Savage**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-4120-1, 437pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1993; this is Laymon's "Jack the Ripper western" novel.) 9th September 1993.

Lee, Tanith. **Nightshades: Thirteen Journeys into Shadow**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0877-8, 311pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror/fantasy collection, first edition; proof copy received; it contains a new novella and twelve reprinted stories.) 4th November 1993.

Leech, Ben. **The Community**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-32973-1, 244pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first edition; "Ben Leech" is a pseudonym of Stephen Bowkett, previously known for his juvenile thrillers; his adult debut comes with cover commend-

ations from Ramsey Campbell and Kim Newman.) 10th September 1993.

Luard, Nicholas. **Himalaya**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-968470-5, 400pp, paperback, £4.99. (SF/adventure novel, first published in 1992; an Abominable Snowman tale; has anyone noticed the essential similarities between the British Mr Luard and the American Mr Crichton [see especially the latter's *Congo*, 1980]? — both specialize in taking hoary sf/fantasy themes from popular writers of yesterday [Rider Haggard, Conan Doyle, Edgar Rice Burroughs, James Hilton, etc] and in making them newly believable for a modern thriller-reading audience; neither of them is published as "science fiction" [perish the thought] and yet they are feeding off the field just as surely as any writer of Steampunk.) *Lote entry: July (?) publication, received in August 1993.*

Lunley, Brian. **The Last Aerie: Vampire World II**. Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-016994-6, 747pp, paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1993.) 26th August 1993.

McCaffrey, Anne, and Elizabeth Ann Scarborough. **Powers That Be**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-02903-8, 312pp, hardcover, £14.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1993.) 23rd September 1993.

McQuinn, Donald E. **Wanderer**. Ballantine/Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-37840-7, 544pp, trade paperback, \$10. (SF/fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *Worrior*; a "quest for ancient knowledge" tale set in a post-Bomb future America; although this is only his second novel, author McQuinn is not young: we are told that he "served as an officer in the U.S. marine corps for 20 years, retiring as a major in 1971"; this is the first Ballantine/Del Rey book we have ever been sent for review.) November 1993.

Moorcock, Michael. **The Brothel in Rosenstrasse: An Extravagant Tale**. Phoenix, ISBN 1-85799-052-8, 191pp, paperback, £5.99. (Historical erotic novel with a slight fantasy element; first published in 1982; this edition has a dedication which wasn't in the last version we saw: "For Angela Carter — one of the great generous hearts of our age — with respect and love.") 5th August 1993.

Newman, Kim. **Anno Dracula**. Pocket, ISBN 0-671-71591-7, 469pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1992; one of the best British fantasy novels of last year, we hear it's been getting a good reception in the USA.) 28th October 1993.

Norton, Andre, and Susan Schwartz. **Empire of the Eagle**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85196-3, 416pp, hardcover, £22.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) November 1993.

Rankin, Robert. **The Sprouts of Wrath**. "The fourth novel in the now legendary Brentford Trilogy." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13844-4, 286pp, paperback, £3.99. (Humorous sf/fantasy novel, first published in 1988.) 23rd September 1993.

Rayfield, Brian. **Topaz Fire**. Legend, ISBN 0-09-926321-1, 432pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; a debut book by a new British writer; it says "first published in 1992" inside, but we think that's a misprint; the novel opens badly, with jaw-cracking names: "Zachaw Calin Curos, K'tan of the Topaz Wind of the Great Army of Chaw, carefully stroked his horse's head"; why do fantasy writers do this? — many readers are immediately thrown out of the book.) 16th September 1993.

Resnick, Mike. **Inferno: A Chronicle of a Distant World**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85437-4,

304pp, hardcover, \$20.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) December 1993.

Robertson, Patrick. **The Guinness Book of Movie Facts & Feats**. 5th edition. Guinness Publishing, ISBN 0-85112-706-1, 240pp, trade paperback, £11.99. (Illustrated guide to all manner of records and statistics regarding the film industry; the first edition was published in 1980; it contains little of direct relevance to sf/fantasy, though of course we're told such facts as the following: "The character most frequently portrayed in horror films is Count Dracula... Representations of the Count or his immediate descendants on screen outnumber those of his closest rival, Frankenstein's monster, by 160 to 112.") 6th September 1993.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. **Red Mars**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21389-9, 671pp, paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1992; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 63.) 31st August 1993.

Rusch, Kristine Kathryn. **Traitors**. Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-054-9, 358pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1993; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at £8.99.) 16th September 1993.

Smith, L. Neil. **Pallas**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-09705-0, 435pp, hardcover, £23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) November 1993.

Striebert, Whitley. **Unholy Fire**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0185-9, 375pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1992; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 60.) 26th August 1993.

Vinge, Vernor. **Across Realtime**. Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-118-9, 533pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf omnibus, first published in the USA, 1997; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; the two linked novels collected here are *The Peecoe Wor*, 1984, and *Morooned in Real Time*, 1986, both of which have appeared previously in the UK as Pan paperback originals.) 19th August 1993.

Volsky, Paula. **The Wolf of Winter**. Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-37210-6, 357pp, trade paperback, £12.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 15th November 1993.

Watson, Ian. **Alien Embassy**. Gollancz/VG/SF, ISBN 0-575-05607-X, 204pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1977; this was Watson's fourth novel.) 16th September 1993.

Weis, Margaret, and Tracy Hickman. **Into the Labyrinth: A Death Gate Novel**. Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-09539-0, 429pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; sixth in its series.) 15th November 1993.

Whitbourn, John. **A Dangerous Energy**. Gollancz/VG/SF, ISBN 0-575-05576-6, 317pp, paperback, £4.99. (Alternative-world fantasy novel, first published in 1992; a debut novel by a British writer, although we've learned that the author previously wrote many ghost stories for Rosemary Pardoe's anthologies; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 68.) 12th August 1993.

Whitbourn, John. **Popes and Phantoms**. Gollancz/VG/SF, ISBN 0-575-05576-6, 317pp, paperback, £4.99. (Alternative-world fantasy novel, first edition; this one is set in Renaissance Italy.) 12th August 1993.

Wilson, Barbara. **Trouble in Transylvania**. Virago, ISBN 1-85381-612-4, 277pp, paperback, £5.99. (Crime novel, first published in

the USA, 1993; further adventures of Cassandra Reilly, translator-investigator heroine of Wilson's earlier *Crime Writers' Association Award-winning Goudi! Afternoon*; this book is probably neither fantasy nor horror, but it's set in Transylvania, it's got some vampire stuff in it, and it has a cover commendation from Ursula Le Guin.) 23rd October 1993.

Wingrove, David. **The Stone Within**. "Chung Kuo Book Four." Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-57963-8, xxv+627pp, paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1992; this is the first of the new-look paperbacks in Wingrove's ongoing saga, with a Jim Burns cover, a general downplaying of the "Chung Kuo" series title, and a descriptive line which states: "Blode Runner meets Shogun in the epic future history.") 9th September 1993.

Wood, Bridget. **Rebel Angel**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-4122-8, 662pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1993; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 74.) 16th September 1993.

Wright, T.M. **Sleepy**. "A romance of the dead." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05506-5, 251pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received.) 14th October 1993.

Yarbro, Chelsea Quinn. **Better in the Dark**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85504-4, 412pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Historical horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; eighth in the "Comte de Saint-Germain" vampire series.) December 1993.

## Novelizations, Spinoffs, Sequels by Other Hands, Shared Worlds, Sharecrops

The following is a list of old books received which fall into the above sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror (including non-fiction about shared worlds, etc.).

Allen, Roger MacBride. **Isaac Asimov's Caliban**. Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-135-9, 312pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; this is a sharecrop novel, based on ideas by the late Isaac Asimov; it's copyright "Byron Preiss Visual Publications Inc.") 19th August 1993.

Asprin, Robert, and Lynn Abbey. **Catwoman: Tiger Hunt**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-123-5, 196pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1992; taking its inspiration from the Botmon comic books and films, it's copyright "DC Comics.") 19th August 1993.

Banks, David. **Iceberg**. "The New Doctor Who Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20392-5, 253pp, paperback, £4.50. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition; the author is an actor who played the leader of the "Cybermen" in the TV series.) 16th September 1993.

Friedman, Michael Jan. **Shadows on the Sun**. "Star Trek." Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-671-71832-0, 340pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf television-and-film-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1993.) 26th August 1993.

Gross, Edward, and Mark A. Altman. **Captain's Logs: The Complete Trek Voyages**. Bantam, ISBN 1-85283-899-X, 269pp, trade paperback, £12.99. (Sf television-and-film shared-universe companion, first published in the USA, 1993; it contains a guide to all episodes of *Star Trek* and its spinoffs, interviews with cast members, etc.) 19th August 1993.

Howe, David J., Mark Stammers and Stephen James Walker. **Doctor Who: The Sixties**. Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-86369-707-0, 162pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Profusely illustrated reference book about the early years of the "Doctor Who" television series; first published in 1992.) 16th September 1993.

Keith, Andrew. **Blood of Heroes**. "Battletech." Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-023344-X, 339pp, paperback, £4.99. (Shared-world game-based sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; it's copyright "FASA.") 26th August 1993.

Neason, Rebecca. **Guises of the Mind**. "Star Trek: The Next Generation." 27. Titan, ISBN 1-85286-464-8, 277pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf television series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1993.) 23rd September 1993.

Rawolinski, Leah. **Star Wreck IV: Live Long and Profit**. Illustrated by Harry Tumbore. "An unauthorised parody." Bantam, ISBN 1-85283-834-5, 333pp, paperback, £2.99. (Sf television-series parody, first published in the USA, 1993; further adventures of Captain James T. Smirk and Mr Smock aboard the starship *Endocrine*.) 19th August 1993.

Verheiden, Mark. **Predator: Cold War**. Illustrated by Ron Randall and Steve Mitchell. Dark Horse Comics, ISBN 1-878574-79-5, unpaginated [circa 100pp], trade paperback, £13.95. (Sf movie spinoff graphic novel, first edition.) Lote entry: Moy publication, received in August 1993.

## Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

Continued from page 58

except wilful ignorance and vile intolerance, and that the produce of scientific creativity ought not to be feared by religious men, nor by feminists, nor by political conservatives, and that such fear is merely the unreasoning electrical reflex of blinkered fools?

What then?

The overwhelming probability, sad to say, is that such a book could never have been published in 1818, that it would have been considered so horribly indecent and blasphemous that anyone who so much as read the manuscript would have screamed in horror. We may be reasonably confident of this because, sad to say, it is far, far easier even today to publish and find an appreciative audience for the ten thousandth rip-off of *Frankenstein* (*Jurassic Park*, to name but one example) than the kind of novel which *Frankenstein* might have been. But it was not our mad technological monsters that made the world the way it is and murdered so many of the things which we ought to hold dear; it was us. To think otherwise is a delusion which might easily possess us till we are irredeemably lost in the icy wilderness of our own moral cowardice.

(Brian Stableford)

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For my ever-growing reference collection on popular fiction, I'm in search of reading copies of the following books. I'm not necessarily interested in first editions: paperbacks, where they exist, will do. If you can provide decent copies at reasonable prices, please send details to David Pringle, Interzone, 217 Preston Drove, Brighton BN1 6FL, England (tel. 0273 504710).

Bennett, E.A. *Fame and Fiction: An Enquiry Into Certain Popularities*. 1901.

Ellis, Stewart Marsh. *Mainly Victorian*. 1925.

Henkin, Leo J. *Dorwinism in the English Novel, 1860-1910*. 1940.

Leisy, Ernest F. *The American Historical Novel*. 1950.

Penzoldt, Peter. *The Supernatural in Fiction*. 1952.

Reynolds, Quentin James. *The Fiction Factory: or, From Pulp Raw to Quality Street; the Story of 100 Years of Publishing at Street and Smith*. 1955.

Papashvily, Helen Waite. *All the Hoppy Endings: A Study of the Domestic Novel in America, the Women Who Wrote It, the Women Who Read It, in the Nineteenth Century*. 1956.

Dalziel, Margaret. *Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago*. 1957.

Dickinson, A.T., Jr. *American Historical Fiction*. 1958.

Murch, A.E. *The Development of the Detective Novel*. 1958.

Falsom, James K. *The American Western Novel*. 1966.

Spatz, Jonas. *Hollywood in Fiction*. 1969.

Greene, Suzanne Ellery. *Books for Pleasure: Popular Fiction 1914-45*. 1974.

Petaja, Emil. *Photoplay Edition*. 1975.

Wagner, Geoffrey. *The Novel and the Cinema*. 1975.

Irwin, W.R. *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy*. 1976.

Rabkin, Eric S. *The Fantastic in Literature*. 1976.

Smith, Myron J., and Robert C. Weller. *Sci Fiction Guide*. 1976.

Hackett, Alice P., and J.H. Burke. *80 Years of Best Sellers*. 1977 (or any later edition).

Barclay, Glen St. John. *Anatomy of Horror: The Masters of Occult Fiction*. 1978.

Sanders, Andrew. *The Victorian Historical Novel, 1840-1880*. 1978.

Sullivan, Jack. *Elegant Nightmares: The English Ghost Story from Le Fanu to Blackwood*. 1978.

Prickett, Stephen. *Victorian Fantasy*. 1979.

Rose, Willie Lee. *Race and Religion in American Historical Fiction: Four Episodes in Popular Culture*. 1979.

Wolfe, Gary. *The Known and the Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction*. 1979.

Attebury, Brian. *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin*. 1980.

Lascelles, Mary. *The Story-Teller Retrieves the Past: Historical Fiction and Fictitious History in the Art of Scott, Stevenson, Kipling and Some Others*. 1980.

Smith, Herbert F. *The Popular American Novel, 1865-1920*. 1980.

Smith, Myron J. *War Story Guide: An Annotated Bibliography of Military Fiction*. 1980.

Hicken, Marilyn E., ed. *Sequels. Vol 1: Adult Books*. 1982 (or any later edition).

Husband, Janet. *Sequels: An Annotated Guide to Novels in Sequence*. 1982 (or any later edition).

Wagar, W. Warren. *Terminal Visions: The Literature of Last Things*. 1982.

Wu, William F. *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction 1850-1940*. 1982.

Bleiler, Everett F., ed. *The Guide to Supernatural Fiction*. 1983.

Guiley, Rosemary. *Love Lines: The Romance Reader's Guide to Printed Pleasures*. 1983.

Rabkin, Eric S., Martin H. Greenberg & Joseph D. Olander, eds. *The End of the World*. 1983.

Shaw, Harry E. *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and His Successors*. 1984.

Bleiler, Everett F., ed. *Supernatural Fiction Writers: Fantasy and Horror*. 2 vols. 1985.

Alkon, Paul K. *Origins of Futuristic Fiction*. 1987.

Bargainnier, Earl F., ed. *Comic Crime*. 1987.

Sabchack, Vivian. *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*. 1987.

Cohn, Jan. *Romance and the Erotics of Property: Mass-Market Fiction for Women*. 1988.

Franklin, H. Bruce. *War Stars: The Superweapon and the American Imagination*. 1988.

Breen, Jon L., and Martin Harry Greenberg, eds. *Murder Off the Rack: Critical Studies of Ten Paperback Masters*. 1989.

Nash, Walter. *Language in Popular Fiction*. 1990.

Foote, Bud. *The Connecticut Yankee in the Twentieth Century: Travel to the Past in Science Fiction*. 1991.

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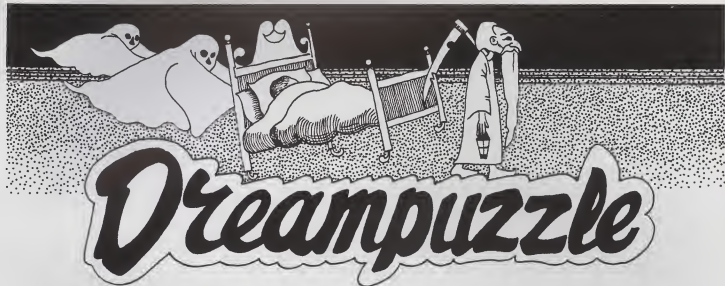
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